THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
JUNE

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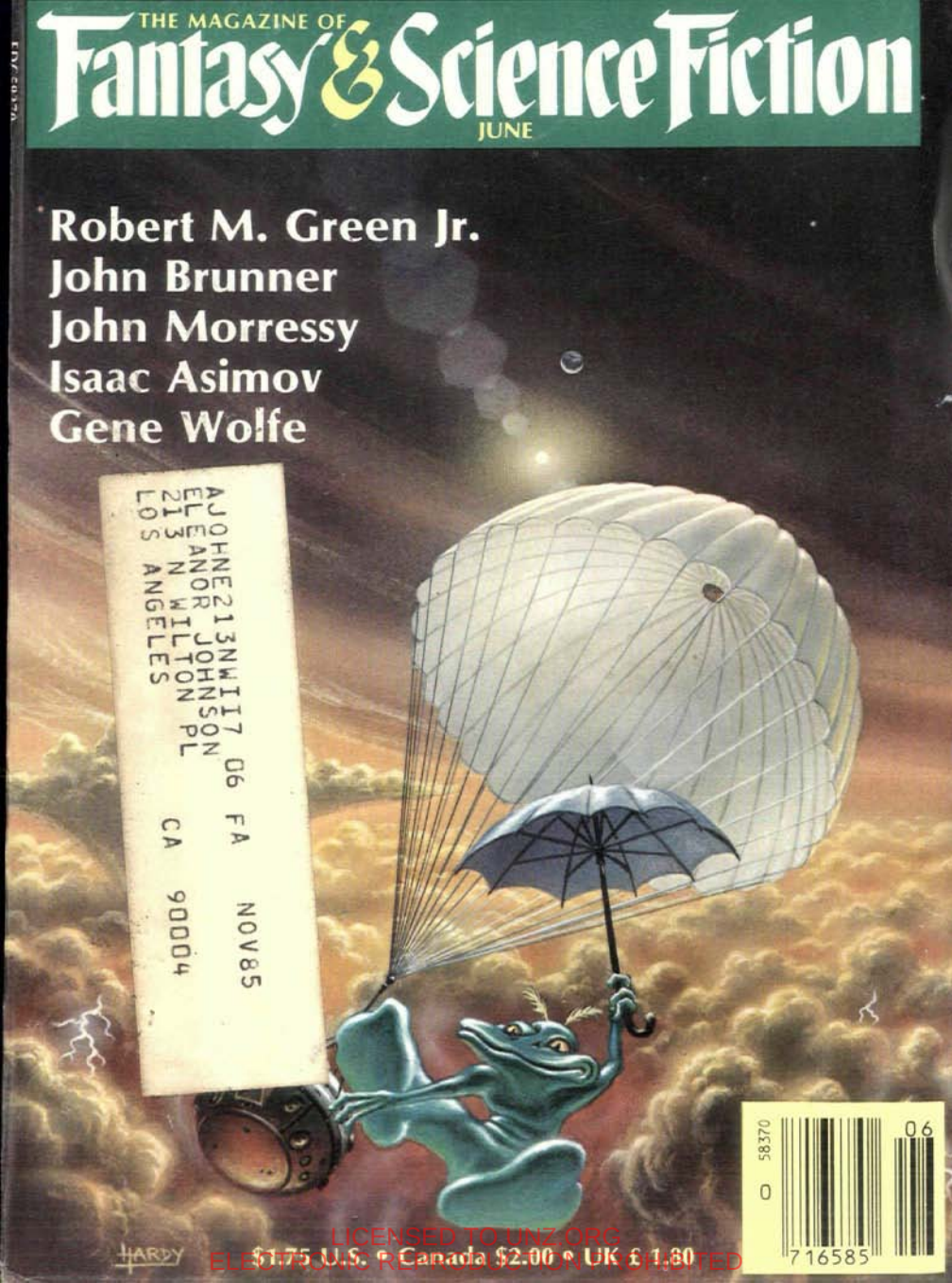

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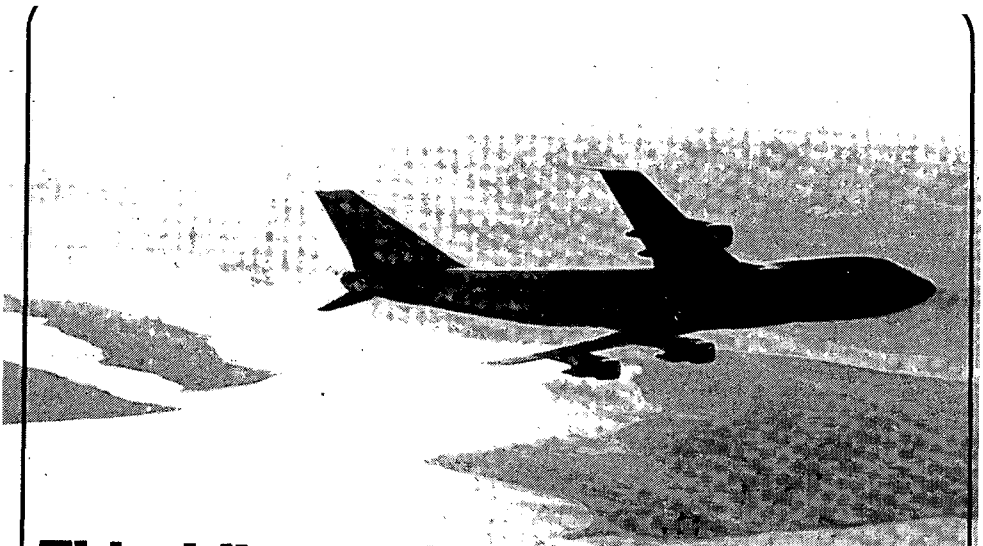

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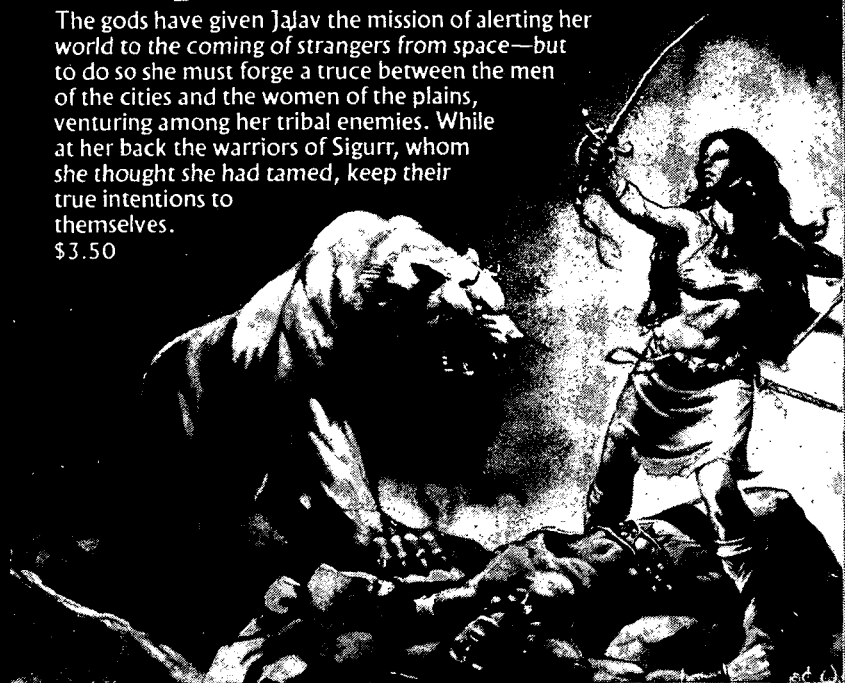

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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JUNE • 36th Year of Publication

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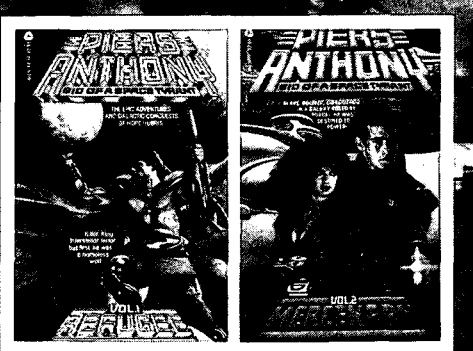

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Robert Green is a newspaperman who has written several superior fantasy stories for F&SF, most recently "The Pallid Piper"(August 1983). His new story — a contemporary fantasy variation on the story of Jacob and Esau — is a compelling tale about Big Ike Popper and the birthright that hangs between his two sons.

The Embezzled Blessing

BY
ROBERT M. GREEN, JR.

Big Ike Popper loved to spend the last hour or two before dark sitting in the cupola on top of the Popper Hotel his daddy had built eighty years ago in the dead center of Poppertown, which was in the dead center of Popper Valley.

This was still Big Ike's command post, though there wasn't quite as much to command as there once had been. From the cupola he had a 360-degree view of everything he owned, which was just about as much as he could see.

The first thing to catch the eye was Popper Mountain, where gold was still being sluiced down the slopes, though Big Ike's daddy's bustling city of the 1890s was now a huddle of slowly collapsing pinewood facades nobody dared approach. Every time he looked at the mountain, Big Ike would say to himself, "I better show my face over there damn soon and remind those ornery miners whose claims they're working."

Next he would look over toward the big notch — Popper Gap — where Daddy first started running sheep. There were still sheep on one side of the notch, and Hereford cattle on the other side, and they both made profits in good years and losses in bad years like anything else — but they also sometimes made bad neighbors. Big Ike would say, "I haven't been over there for a month. Time sure flies. I better drive over sometime next week. I wouldn't want those people to get the idea I don't keep an eye on them. They might start taking potshots at each other."

Next he would look down at the commercial buildings in town. There was the Popper Bank ("Benny better do a double check on that new teller.

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He's got a shifty eye.") and the *Poppertown Gazette* ("Why in hell doesn't somebody read proof on the social notes? That stringer from Crawford Butte spells all the names wrong. I know half those people up there; I bet they're hopping mad.").

Big Ike was eighty years old, and he didn't always have the git-up-and-go to check these things out in person. He had to send his sons, Jake and Big Ed, to crack the whip, and he had to pretend he trusted them to do it right, though he knew Big Ed would rather slap a back than crack a whip, and Jake would sometimes crack a whip that didn't need cracking.

But all in all, things ran well. Big Ike had learned the foolishness of pride; it was many years since he had ever sat up here telling himself lies about how great he was, but sometimes he couldn't help saying, "All this bounty is mine. God must love me."

He never said it out loud. It never occurred to him that he could be overheard by anybody but God.

But tonight Benny called him on it.

"Don't count on it, Big Ike," said Benny.

"It isn't fair for you to skulk around here invisible. I thought we agreed on that."

"I'm sorry, Big Ike," said Benny. "I forgot. There's a storm coming up tonight. Popper Mountain will be covered with snow by tomorrow, and the ditches in the valley will all be overflowing by noon. I was in a hurry to get up here and see how things looked."

"I don't even see a cloud," said Big Ike.

"You will."

"O.K. How about going down and putting on a shape if you're going to hang around here?"

"Right," said Benny. He didn't disappear, because there wasn't anything of him to disappear, but Big Ike took it for granted he was on his way down to the Popper Suite to slip into a body of some sort. Benny always did whatever he said he was going to do.

Benny was back in five minutes: pale, with a thin face and tight lips. He was wearing a double-breasted jacket with padded shoulders and wide lapels. His hat was light gray with a broad brim and a purple and gold hatband. He was flipping a quarter with one hand. The other hand was pocketed.

"George Raft!" said Big Ike.

"Yeah," snarled Benny. "Whaddaya want, Boss?"

"You got a real repertoire now. I remember when all you could do was Charlie Chaplin and Francis X. Bushman."

"They fooled a lot of people. I wouldn't try them now. They wouldn't mean anything to anybody. Now what were we talking about before you chased me out of here?"

"You were saying God didn't love me."

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"No, I wasn't. I was just wondering what made you so cocksure."

"I was thinking of all the things God gave me."

"That's the *world,* Big Ike. The *devil* could give you *that.*"

"I never made any deals with the devil."

I'm pulling your leg. God loves you. Just don't read too much into your good luck. Look at the happy endings He gave the Apostles."

"What kind of endings, Benny?"

"Three were crucified, two were stabbed, one shot full of arrows, one beheaded, one flayed alive, one hanged — two if you count Judas."

"Well, nobody knows what's gong to happen to me, either. I know people who'd like to put me away."

"So do I," said Benny. "But they probably won't."

"I wouldn't mind. I always took my chances, Benny. I never asked to be eased out on a bed of roses."

"You won't be. You'll go out with a heartache. Is that good enough for you?"

"What kind of a heartache, Benny?"

"I should have kept my mouth shut."

"You mean those boys," said Big Ike.

"Yeah."

"It's an old heartache. I can bear it. Big Ed is too rough and hasty. Jake is too smart. Big Ed will get all the property, and Jake will screw him out of it. What can I do about it?"

"Nothing. Live your life and die your death. Your boys will do the same thing when the time comes. Maybe Jake will screw Big Ed. Maybe Big Ed will catch Jake in a dark alley and put a pickax through his head. Maybe not."

"How come you know the answers to everything else but not this?"

Benny shrugged. "I only know the answers when the questions come up. The question of Jake screwing Big Ed hasn't really come up yet. Keep your mind off it as much as you can. And, hey, by the way—"

"Yeah?"

"Don't worry, Big Ike. God loves you."

What Big Ed liked best of all to do was go back in the hills and break wild horses to the saddle. Evenings he liked to hang around the Sheepmen's Bar in Poppertown, either playing pool in the back room or swapping dirty jokes at the bar and getting blissfully drunk. He never got nasty drunk, and he hardly ever got seriously involved with women, though as a good-natured, good-looking bachelor heir to possible millions, he could have his pick of pretty girls.

He was no ascetic. He liked sex, but romance made him uncomfortable. He didn't want to get married until he found a woman who shared his fondness for pool, booze, and wild horses. He hoped it would be at

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least ten years before he found such a woman.

What Big Ed liked least of all to do was work. That was why Big Ike, at Benny's suggestion, had loaded him down with enough jobs to keep him under discipline for at least thirty hours a week. These were taxing jobs — the kind that couldn't be done sloppily without stirring up some kind of an uproar.

With all his weaknesses, Big Ed was a Daddy-fearing boy who wouldn't think of goofing off unless he could do it without Daddy finding out.

On Thursday nights Big Ed's job was to help get the *Poppertown Gazette* (weekly) ready for delivery first thing in the morning. First he had to read proof on the ads. If he got too drunk and let a wrong price get printed on a J.C. Penney sale ad, Daddy would blister him for a week. Then he had to help run the papers through the folder and the addressing machines. Then he had to see that they were properly stacked by the front door for eight delivery boys, and correctly bagged for the out-of-town post office delivery routes.

Tonight Big Ed was more than a little tiddly, but he considered himself to be several degrees less than blotto. He would have been less than tiddly, too, if his brother Jake hadn't come in to join him at the Sheepmen's Bar. It was nice to be sharing drinks and jokes with Jake, who usually looked down his intellectual nose at him, and he didn't know how to say no when Jake stood him drinks for a solid hour. Big Ed knew he'd probably have been flat on his back on the floor if Jake hadn't finally paid up and gone home — or somewhere. Jake's comings and goings were mysterious.

The only people at the shop when Big Ed got there were Sam Boggs, the pressman, and Sam's wife, Gloria, who worked the Baum folder and the machine that stamped the addresses on the mailed papers. The typesetter had gone home early with a cold. Big Ed prayed there wouldn't be many mistakes to be corrected. Sam could set a little type in a pinch, but he was slow at it and he hated to do it.

Big Ed took his time reading the first page proof. Jake and Big Ike would look carefully for typos tomorrow. Sam and Gloria were restive; they'd had a long day. Big Ed was sorry for them, but he couldn't let them go. This was going to be a clean paper for a change. He was fed up with Daddy's sad frowns and Jake's smart-ass sneers.

It seemed to be his lucky night. All he could find was one typo on a price in the Golden Rule ad: $1.86 was supposed to be: $1.89. It was in movable type. All he had to do was loosen the chase and turn the 6 upside down.

"I'll do it, Big Ed," said Sam.

"Naw," said Big Ed. "It won't tax my little brain."

Big Ed took a quoin key and leaned

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over the flatbed of the press to loosen the quoins of the chase that held the type. Then he leaned over and put his head as close as he could get to the chase, looking for the guilty 6.

The light was lousy down there, and the booze was starting to blur his vision. He decided the thing to do was pick up the chase and put it under the bright light hanging over the mailing and wrapping table.

Hah? This was something Brother Jake couldn't do. Pick up a chase loaded with type. Big Ed slid it toward him and lifted it with a flourish, wondering if Gloria Boggs had ever seen a real man pick up a load of metal with such dash and style.

With the quoins loosened, all the type clunked and tinkled onto the floor. So did a cast-lead mat of a smiling lady brandishing a no-stick frying pan. it broke in two when it hit the floor.

The poker game at the Elks Lodge broke up at 3 A.M., and Jake Popper came out with $3,645. He knew that if he kept on winning like this, he was soon going to find it impossible to find anyone to play with him. He had occasionally tried to lose on purpose, but it was impossible for him. He didn't mind losing, but he didn't know how to dissemble — even to himself. It was an art he might have to learn.

One of these days he would be footloose. Big Ed would inherit all of Daddy's real estate, and what would there be then to keep Jake here in Popper County? Daddy would leave him plenty of liquid capital, and what he would probably have to do would be to take it on the road, cleaning out the poker players of one town after another, and never looking back. It struck him as a depressing prospect.

He wandered down to the Tom Mix All Night Diner. Gusts of wind dashed cold rain in his face. The mountains would be snowcapped by dawn.

He had canned chow mein because it was the least greasy thing Tom Mix had to offer. He washed it down with a glass of milk.

On his way out he bumped into Sam and Gloria Boggs coming in.

"Late getting the paper out, aren't you?" he said.

"Naah," snarled Sam.

"It's after three."

"It's late, all right, but we didn't get the paper out."

"Trouble?"

"You might say," said Sam.

"Going to be up all night, huh?"

"Not us," said Sam, pushing past Jake to get to the counter, where Gloria was already seated and reading a menu she knew by heart.

"Where's my big brother?" asked Jake.

"Sitting on the floor by the big press when we left," said Sam over his shoulder. "Bawling like a baby. Probably still is."

• • •

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Big Ed still was.

A gin bottle beside him had about two good gulps left in it. He was picking up pied type in both hands and letting it sift back through his fingers to the floor.

He was sobbing.

Jake sat down beside him on the cold floor and put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's not that bad, Big Ed," he said gently. "Split milk. Pied type. What's the difference?"

"I can — I can do without spilt milk. I can't — I can't put out a paper with pied type." Big Ed couldn't help the tears or the chokes, but he knew better than to sob in front of Jake.

"Come on, Big Ed. You can unpi it. Three-fourths of it is machine-set. You can work the Linotype."

"Slowly . . . very — slowly."

"So the paper will be a little late. And you can find a couple of fonts of hand-set type for the fancy stuff. They don't have to match the type on the floor. Just so the prices are right."

"How about the busted picture? I — I never cast a — mat before."

"Remember the lead soldiers we used to make? It's the same thing."

"And I can't feed the press. I can't handle any of it, Jake. I can't handle it."

"When do the delivery boys check in?"

"About eight. I was going to call their homes and tell them don't bother."

"What were you going to tell Big Ike?"

"Oh, Jesus, Jake, I don't know. He won't ever forgive me."

"He won't know what happened if the paper gets out," said Jake.

"How's it gonna get out?"

"How important is it to you?"

"Well, Daddy *would* forgive me, I guess. He'd forgive a cow turd if it was his son. But he wouldn't ever trust me again. I couldn't stand that. Remember that apple grower in the notch that dumped his extra bug killer in the creek and killed off all them cattle? Daddy forgave him, but he was as useful as a fart from then on. You know that look of Daddy's when you let him down."

"You want me to get your paper out, Big Ed?"

"How? Sam Boggs ain't coming back. You can't run the press."

"I know people who can. People who owe me favors. What do you say, Big Ed?"

"What will it cost me?"

"It's really important to you, huh?"

"You bet," said Big Ed.

"All right," said Jake, "Listen carefully. This isn't as bad as it may sound. I don't want any of Daddy's money when he dies, and I don't want any of his voting stock. All I want is a hundred-dollar-a-year lease on all that real estate he's going to leave you.

"Hell, Jake, I don't need a *nickel* a year for all that stuff. When Daddy's dead, I'll *give* it to you."

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"You can't," said Jake. "I asked the trust attorneys. Daddy doesn't own it free and clear, and neither will you. It has to be passed on to the oldest male relative. It can't be sold. But it can be leased. I'll write out an agreement for you to sign right now, Big Ed. Then you can go home and sleep without a worry in the world. The paper will come out in the morning, and Daddy never has to know how."

Anybody in Poppertown could call Big Ike by his first name and swap blue jokes with him. He was looked upon as a Good Guy. But he was also looked upon with awe. Even when his jokes were lousy, they got a laugh.

This was because every weekday, when the weather permitted, Big Ike toured the county with a different chauffeur at the wheel of his car.

Nobody knew about Benny, who would materialize early each touring morning as a different historical or show biz personage (in chauffeur's uniform), take the service elevator down to the garage in the hotel basement, and drive the car up the ramp and around to the front veranda (the Popper Hotel had been built when elegant ladies sat in rocking chairs on hotel verandas) to pick up Big Ike.

For the past five years, Big Ike had been wearing dark glasses and toting a cane on his morning jaunts. There was nothing seriously wrong with his eyesight, but he hoped his fellow citizens would think there was and forgive him for having all these chauffeurs. It was against his nature to put on the dog, but he didn't much like driving; Benny loved it and was good at it and was good company, too. Big Ike needed him.

Today Benny was Henry VIII, but few eyes popped as he went by. A chauffeur's uniform tended to neutralize a famous face. Even Abraham Lincoln would have looked like just another chauffeur with a chin beard and a wart.

The mountains were snowed in today; so they toured the flatlands, where summer irrigation produced sugar beets, seed corn, seed onions, hops, produce, hay, apples, cherries, peaches, and pears. Growing season was over now — even the late fruit had been picked. The empty row crop fields looked bleak under the low cloud cover, but this was the best time of the year to inspect the empty irrigation ditches and make sure they were being shored and cleared out.

"They're going to need levees along these ditches next spring." Benny intoned in a kingly manner.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty, but you're nuts," said Big Ike.

"I know they've never built levees before, but they've never had a snowmelt runoff like they're going to have next spring. Freak weather in the Pacific. It will be too much for the big dams to hold. We better warn our people here."

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"You've never been wrong, Your Majesty. How about the sheep and cattle ranchers? And about the miners?"

"They'll be snowed in. Tell them to stock up for the winter or move in with friends in the valley."

"It's hard to tell those people anything, Your Majesty."

"Stare them down. The power will shine out of your eyes."

"Will it really? I'd like to see that in a mirror."

"It won't show up in a mirror."

"I guess I'll have to pay for the levees," said Big Ike.

"It won't be more than a couple of million. You'll get it all back and more. Thousands of acres of produce will be washed out all over the West. The price will skyrocket. Your sugar beets will be diamonds and gold."

"What will I do with all that money? I'm getting sick of money."

"Commoner," said the king with a sneer. "Buy more land. You want to leave something to your younger son, don't you? Well, all the land you own now has strings on it; you *have* to leave it to Big Ed."

"Of course. I'm not going to try to break the will."

"But anything you buy with your own profits you are free to leave to Jake. Do you want to? I'm not too sure *I'd* want to."

"Jake's all right," said Big Ike.

"Can you picture him wading knee-deep into a dairy barn with a manure shovel?"

"I don't want him to be poor, Your Majesty."

"Jake?" The king exploded with a Tudor guffaw. "You couldn't *make* him poor. He carries a wad home every night from some poker game. Tighten your seat belt, commoner. We're heading for the hill country. and we've got to beat the bad weather. We've got to talk those people into stocking up or getting out while they still can."

"You're a good king, Benny."

"You bet I am."

By 9:30 in the morning, all the paid-for and courtesy copies of the *Poppertown Gazette* were in the hands of the delivery boys or the U.S. Postal Service, and Jake went home to the three-story California bungalow Big Ike had built sixty years ago among two files of cottonwood trees on the bank of a river that had water in it at least nine and a half months out of twelve.

Mommy — Miss Becky to everyone else in Poppertown — didn't ask him where he'd been all night. She never did. She kissed him and went into the kitchen to squeeze oranges and fry bacon and scramble eggs and brown English muffins and percolate coffee for his breakfast.

Jake followed her lovingly around the kitchen. Someday, he knew, he would be surprised and dazzled into marrying somebody who wouldn't

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want to live here with Mommy and who would invariably ask him where he had been all night. Not yet, dear Lord, not yet!

Jake and Miss Becky seemed to be the only ones who still loved this out-of-date house with no view of anything but trees and a row of dirty red-brick houses on the far side of the river. That was the reason Big Ike spent most of his time on top of the hotel looking at mountains. That was why Big Ed spend his happiest hours riding wild horses in the hills. Yet, oddly enough, both Big Ike and Big Ed spent all their long Sundays here in the old house without pacing floors or looking at watches. One day a week the family was a family, comfortable in a shabby, baggy old cocoon of love.

Miss Becky poured herself a cup of coffee and sat down to keep Jake company while he ate.

"Did you win a lot of money last night?"

"Better than money," he said, laughing. "Look."

He handed her a note scribbled in pencil on a piece of POPPERTOWN GAZETTE stationery.

She recognized the handwriting.

To Whom It May Concern:

For services received, I, Edham Popper, promise that all real estate I shall inherit from the estate of my father, Isaac Popper, will be leased by me to my brother, Jacob Popper, for as long as he lives, for an annual rental fee of one hundred dollars. If I should predecease Jacob Popper, this agreement shall be binding on my heirs until the death of the aforesaid Jacob Popper, at which time it will revert to my estate.

The signature was obviously Big Ed's, though wobbly.

Miss Becky gasped. "Jake! Is this legal?"

"I'm not too fluent in legalese. I'm going to get a lawyer to word it right. Then I'll take it back to Big Ed. Don't worry, Mommy. He'll sign it."

"Yes. He's a good boy at heart."

"Greatest guy in the world," said Jake.

"So why are we conspiring against him?" she laughed.

"It's a conspiracy of mercy. Big Ed can't handle all that real estate. He'll let it go to wrack and ruin."

"I keep telling myself the same thing," she said wryly. "I'm not a very good mother to him, am I? But I do love him, Jacob."

"We both love him, but he doesn't belong to the Jake and Becky Club."

"No. He doesn't, does he?" she said. "And neither does your Daddy."

Benny had learned long ago not to expect too much from his trips downtown to gather intelligence for Big Ike.

He had to be careful what bodies

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he used. Alone with Big Ike, he could look exactly like George Raft. That was the way the old man liked. But downtown there had to be some flaw in the resemblance. He didn't want anyone saying, "Hey, I saw George Raft today;" and having someone else say, "Dope, don't you know Raft is dead?" It caused less confusion if people simply said, "Hey, I saw a guy who looked a whole lot like George Raft."

He really would have preferred not to go downtown at all by himself, but Big Ike kept saying, "Benny, you're my eyes and ears. How can I keep control of things if I don't know what's going on?"

Benny couldn't make the old man understand that what you mostly heard in sober places was wisdom about the weather, and what you heard in bars was "how great I am" or "how great I almost was" or "how great I would be if only. . . ."

Big Ike still seemed to think that because Benny was supernatural, he could read minds and see into the future. Benny couldn't do either, but he could make supernaturally shrewd decisions on the basis of information that was available to everybody else. Sometimes he guessed wrong — maybe one time out of fifty.

Benny decided that today, in the approximate but not perfect guise of the late Humphrey Bogart, he would visit the Gazette Building, to see if the paper had been printed and distributed without hitches. Big Ike liked to be reassured on this.

People at weekly newspapers were always relaxed and polite on publication day. All the work was done for *this* week. Benny would pretend to be an irritated subscriber. Somebody would talk to him soothingly. He would come down off his high horse and start asking polite questions. The person he had come to scold would sigh with relief and answer any question he asked.

Ramona MacDowell was the name of the managing editor. Benny had chatted with her in other forms with other voices. She didn't do much editing outside of proofreading and a little harmless viewing with alarm or pointing with pride on the editorial page once a week. Essentially she was a bookkeeper, price computer, browbeater of happy-go-lucky employees, sales-person of advertising space to local merchants who didn't dare offend Big Ike.

Benny (neo-Bogart) opened the paper to page three and laid it on the counter.

"Look, ma'am. Says here there was a bridge tournament at the home of Mrs. Vern Wax. Right here, ma'am. Under Chapparal Corner. I'm Mr. Vern Wax. There wasn't no bridge tournament. Not Saturday night. Not any night. Our preacher called up and made Mrs. Wax cry. I think we got us a libel case."

"Oh, God," said Ramona.

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Her lip trembled. It was time for Benny to get off his high horse.

"Well, look, ma'am, a retraction in next week's paper ought to fix it up."

"There — Oh, God — there might not *be* a next week's paper. What am I going to do? Something terrible happened last night."

"Oh?" said Benny. It was an "Oh" of courteous concern, and Ramona took it as a victory.

"Don't ask me what," she said. "They won't tell me. I came in early and our pressman wasn't here. There was a scab pressman from Oney's Job Printing finishing up the last press run, and the publisher's brother was supervising the boys from the delivery routes and filling up the bags for the post office. When they got through, they just walked out. They didn't even say good morning."

"Well, you got your paper out, didn't you?"

"I hope so," she said. "But those people didn't belong here. As soon as they left, I tried to call the publisher, but he wasn't home. Then I called his father, Isaac Popper, and he didn't know anything about it."

"Benny shook his head. "Modern boys never think to call their parents."

"So then I called our pressman, Sam Boggs. He said to mail him his paycheck. I asked him where our publisher was. He said he hoped in hell. I asked him if he was coming back to work, and he said he doubted it. I asked him what happened last night, and he hung up on me."

"Well, ma'am," said Benny, "All I can say is I'm sorry I bothered you about the bridge party item. I'll just tell the folks in Chapparal Corners it was a mistake. We'll all have a good laugh. You'll have a good laugh, too, when all this mess gets straightened out. Don't worry. Things like this always work out. We'd hate to lose your fine paper."

He bowed stiffly and walked out before she had a chance to cry on his shoulder.

Big Ed woke up, sick and cold, in a pup tent in a ponderosa grove forty miles from Poppertown and half a mile higher above sea level. He wished he'd remembered to bring a sleeping bag and a bottle of booze.

Well, it was only twenty more miles to Julio Madariaga's spread outside the Basque village in Galilee Valley. It would be a cold ride — his car heater was busted — but it wouldn't be as cold as the wild horse rides he and Julio used to have when they were teenagers.

Maybe Julio would have some of that good red wine. He probably ought to stay off the stuff for a while, but he would need it when he got to Julio's. He'd need two big tumblers of it before he could ask them for a job. That wouldn't be the hardest part. They knew he was good with animals. The hardest part would be explaining to Julio's family why he couldn't go back

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over the mountains to face his daddy.

"That's a horrible idea, Benny," said Big Ike, pacing the floor of the cupola. "That's the dirtiest trick I can think of. It's worse than dirty. It's perverted."

"No, it isn't, Big Ike. You haven't let me explain."

This was the first time Benny had ever appeared in the shape of a woman. He was a combination of Greta Garbo and Ingrid Bergman in their respective primes.

He spoke in a contralto voice.

"You're going to put ideas in those boys' heads," said Big Ike. "They'll think you're a real woman."

"I am. Whatever shape I take is real while it lasts."

"When are they going to find out you're a drag queen?"

"I'm not, Big Ike. I'm always what I appear to be."

"Look, Benny, I don't know about Jake, but if you horse around with Big Ed, you'll get a black eye. He won't put up with a teaser."

"I won't tease him. I'll touch his soul. He's never had his soul touched by a chaste woman. It will make a new man of him."

"What about Jake?"

"I don't know yet," said Benny. "Maybe I'll learn something."

"I thought you knew everything."

"I never said I was omniscient. I'm a good guesser, that's all."

"Best guesser in the world, but you never went around messing up lives. You never tried to make a new man out of anybody."

"I came to you in a dozen shapes before your father died, Big Ike. Remember the fawn you shot over in West Flats when you were sixteen? You thought it would be fun. Just fun."

"God, what a look it gave me. I'll never forget. I never shot a fawn again. How did you know about that?"

"I was the fawn. I knew I was going to be stuck with you for the rest of your life. I had to turn you into someone whose company I could stand. Also, I had to find out what you could be turned into. That's what I'll be doing with your boys."

"Why bother with Jake? Big Ed gets you when I die. Not Jake."

"Not necessarily. I'm not in the will. I'm not written down anywhere. You have to give me away *personally* when it's time. Why not give me to Jake? Big Ed gets everything else."

"No, Jake will get plenty of money. He's smart. He'll reinvest it and triple it. Besides, I don't love Jake the way I love Big Ed. You never know what's going on in his head."

"Well," said Benny, "I know what's going on in *your* head. If you don't stop ogling my bosom, I'll vanish."

"Yeah, Benny, you'd better do that. I'm a dirty old man."

Benny vanished.

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Ramona MacDowell worked till 10:30 that night filling out quarterly payroll report forms. Then she walked up Main Street to the Sheepmen's Bar on the off chance she might meet Jake Popper there.

She timed it just right. Jake was not only there but was between games. He had just cleaned out a bunch of railroad men who had to hurry off to work on the night shift.

Jake had been rude to Ramona at the shop that morning, and maybe he would be again, but she had to find out about Big Ed and the fate of the *Gazette*. She invited herself to sit down beside him.

He smiled and handed her the full glass of beer in front of him.

"Here you go, Ramona. I haven't touched this and it's still cold, and you look like you need it."

She was flustered. "Don't you want it? I'll order another one."

"No. I just keep a full glass in front of me for show. People won't let me into their poker games if they think I'm a teetotaler. Well, I'm not a teetotaler, but I don't mix beer with cards. I just keep it around me and look convivial. Cardsharps aren't convivial; they run cardsharps out of town. Don't stand on ceremony, Ramona. I know you need it, and I know what your unspoken question is. The answer is: No, I haven't heard from Big Ed. Can't you function without him?"

He knew it was cruel of him to ask that. He knew she was in love with Big Ed, and how could she not *know* he knew it.

"Well," she said "Uh — thank you. Yes, we can *function*. That is, we can if Sam Boggs comes back or if we can find another pressman."

"Don't worry about a pressman. I found you one today, didn't I?"

"He was a scab. Well, maybe it doesn't matter in a little bitty shop like ours. But — but we need somebody to sign checks and mediate in arguments. I mean somebody who comes to the plant regularly. I mean — aren't you listening to me?"

Jake had always been logical about Beauty. His favorite maxims on the subject were that beauty is only skin-deep and that all cats are gray in the dark.

But that was before he had ever encountered beauty. Now beauty was approaching him from across the room — the only beautiful woman he had ever seen — and what he saw in her was neither skin-deep nor in any way comparable to any cat of any color in the dark.

He prepared to defend himself against what he thought he saw, because if he couldn't talk himself out of seeing her as beautiful, he would have to believe that beauty was a real quality — like honesty or talent — and that all homely people were second-class citizens, and that even beautiful *people* were inferior to prizewinning collies.

Why was she approaching him?

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Should he stand up as a gentleman would? Or should he grovel as an idolater would?

She wasn't approaching him. She was approaching Ramona.

"Ms. MacDowell," said the Beauty in a contralto voice, "you were pointed out to me. My name is Anastasia Llewellyn. I can draw portraits and caricatures. Very quickly, without asking people to hold a pose. From memory, if necessary. I have also had experience as a reporter and feature writer. I don't require much money, but I need challenging work, and I like the look of your *Gazette*."

Jake looked at Ramona. Her face had "no" written all over it. He jumped in before she could frame the word.

"I'd like to see your work," he said. "Caricatures would be great in the *Gazette*. Of course it's really Miss MacDowell's decision to make." He stood up. "But I had to express my opinion. I'm Jake Popper."

"Aren't you the publisher?" said Beauty.

"No. That's my father, Isaac Popper. Maybe I shouldn't have shot off my mouth, but I think caricatures is a great idea. Don't you think it's a great idea, Ramona?"

"I'd have to talk it over with Edham first," she said primly.

"I think Edham has gone off to his friends in the hills to search his soul. He may be gone all winter."

"In that case, there may not be a *Poppertown Gazette* anymore. Who's going to sign the checks?"

"Daddy can sign them. If it's too much trouble to take them to Daddy all the time, we'll arrange with the bank so I can sign them. Don't fret, Ramona. We're in business. Sit down, Ms. Llewellyn. Let's talk."

"Miss," she said. "Not Ms. And call me Anastasia."

Big Ed usually dropped over to the hotel Saturday afternoons to sit up in the cupola drinking beer with Big Ike and relaying the latest gossip about old-timers back in the hills.

Big Ike sat up this Saturday until after 10 P.M., waiting for Big Ed. Then he went down to his suite and phoned Miss Becky.

"I'm lonely, honey," he said.

"I was afraid you might be," she said. "Jake told me Big Ed was off in the hills somewhere. But haven't you got your creepy little friend?"

"No. Benny's out gallivanting, too. Why don't you come over? I'll get the chef to fix something special. Roast lamb with mint sauce."

"Yum. But it's sleeting and I think I'm getting a cold."

"Well, why don't I come over there? Why don't you send Jake over to pick me up?"

"Jacob's taking a young lady out to dinner."

"He never takes young ladies to dinner."

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"He sounds like he's in love."

"What's her name?"

"Annie. Annie Station-something. Beauty personified, he says."

"Uh-oh," said Big Ike. "I think I know who it is, but I hope I don't."

"Who do you think?"

"Greta Garbo."

She laughed. "You crazy galoot."

"Why don't I come over and spend the night? I'll take a cab."

"Hurry," she said.

Miss Becky had the daybed downstairs made up for him by the time he got there. He'd been afraid she might put him in the canvas cot she kept for Big Ed on the rare nights he stayed here. The only other beds were Jake's, which would be occupied sometime before daylight, and the big double bed — the marriage bed — where Miss Becky still slept. Big Ike hadn't slept in a double bed for twenty years. He didn't want to go back to it now.

He sat in the kitchen breakfast nook and sipped Ovaltine with Miss Becky. This was nice. He was glad he'd come.

"What's Big Ed running off to the hills for?" he said.

"He and Jake had some kind of trouble at the *Gazette*. Jake says he went off to sulk."

"What about?"

"I think he got drunk and disgraced himself and doesn't want to face anybody," she said.

Big Ike chuckled. "I had times like that, too, when I was a sprout. He'll get over it. He's probably with the Bako youngster — Madariaga. I wintered with his daddy fifty years ago. They've got a snug place in Galilee Valley. I wouldn't worry, honey."

"I never worry about Big Ed," she said. "he's no greenhorn."

"How come Jake never comes to me about things like that?"

"He knows you're on Big Ed's side."

"Well, I'm on Jake's side, too. I just can't get close to him. I think sometimes he looks down his nose at me because I ain't smart."

"He worships you," said Miss Becky.

"He don't show it."

"Maybe he would if you showed him a little affection. I don't mean putting your arm around him. That would make him uncomfortable. But you could ask him questions and try to be interested in his answers. For some people that's more affectionate than hugging."

"I wish you'd told me this a long time ago."

"I didn't know it a long time ago. Excuse me a minute."

She went to the cupboard and got out a bottle of cheap sherry she used mostly for cooking. Then she filled half a tumbler for herself and half a tumbler for him.

"Here," she said. "Let's both take one big gulp and wait for the inner glow. Then one more gulp. Do what I

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say, honey. It's important."

Big Ike was too old to get an inner glow out of one or even two big gulps of sherry, but he had learned to obey Miss Becky whenever she talked to him in this tone of voice.

He took his gulp and hoped there was a warm light in his eyes.

"Now," she said, after taking her second gulp, "*Now!* Let's don't start sticking up for each other's favorite boys. If anyone has to be the villain, I'll let it be Jake, but at least try to understand why he did what he did."

"Did what?"

She told him what Jake had told her about finding Big Ed in the press-room, drunk and weeping over a pile of pied type on the floor. Then she told him about the paper Jake had made Big Ed sign.

"I saw the paper. It was properly signed. Don't explode all at once, Isaac. Count ten slowly and then holler 'villain.'"

"'City slicker' is a better word than villain. That's Jake inside and out. An ordinary dumb villain would have gotten Big Ed to sign the property over to him outright. It wouldn't have worked. Under the will Big Ed can't give anything away — or even sell it. But he can lease it. Nobody ever thought of that." He laughed. "City slicker. I never had any city slickers in my family. Neither did you. How did it come down to Jake?"

"Remember how you and Big Ed used to laugh at him every time he fell off a horse or tried to throw a lasso? Remember that ugly tone you used to get in your voice when you said, 'My younger boy is on the chess team; he writes *pomes*, too'? Remember? That's how it came down to Jake."

"Don't get me wrong, Miss Becky. I'm not mad at Jake. He did this thing in the open. He didn't lie or cheat. But its a problem, you know. I wish he hadn't done it. Jake's going to wish the same thing if Big Ed comes back drunk with that Madariaga boy looking for trouble."

"You're right," said Miss Becky.

"And one other thing," said Big Ike. "The city slicker won't be so slick after a few years of losing money on all that real estate."

"You don't lose money on it. You don't even pretend to be slick."

"No. But I had Benny. Jake won't get Benny."

Big Ed sat up late that night in Galilee, sipping tea with Julio Madariaga; his wife, Marguerita; and her wiry, indestructible-looking grandfather, Pablo Anduiza, who had known Big Ike when he was younger than Big Ed and didn't own much more than the clothes he wore.

Big Ed didn't much like tea, but he liked sympathy, and he knew he wouldn't get much of it if he accepted the red wine they offered him. He didn't know how to sip wine, and the

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old man didn't have time for guzzlers.

"Your brother was never my favorite person," said Julio. "Why did you sign that paper?"

"He had me over a barrel."

"Take it to court."

"No," said old Pablo. "Courts are foolishness. Big Ike will leave you stocks and bonds and cash money, will he not? You won't be poor."

"No, sir, but I'll be laughed at. I'll spend the money foolishly. I'm not smart like my brother. I'm the sap of the family tree."

Old Pablo snickered. "You know who was the sap of your family tree when I was your age?"

"No."

"Your father. Big Ike. His own father was still alive in those days, and he made your father do the things you have to do now. Run the paper, visit the farmers and ranchers and miners and give them lousy advice. If he told some farmer who was dumb enough to listen to him that he ought to plant sugar beets instead of seed onions, that would be the year everybody was giving away their sugar beets and mortgaging their homes to buy onions."

"That's hard to believe, sir. Daddy's a good guesser."

"Sure, after *his* daddy died and left him his brain. Not before."

"How can somebody leave somebody a brain?"

"Don't ask me. Just go home and wait. Do what you're told. Stay near your father, and be at his side when he is ready to give you his blessing. Let your brother have his piece of paper and his hundred-dollar leases. You'll step into Big Ike's shoes, not him."

Jake took Anastasia to a nightclub where the food was mediocre but the atmosphere was relaxing. It had a dance floor and a man who played pre-1960s dance music on an electric organ.

Jake was embarrassed about his dancing, but he sensed that Anastasia was the kind of girl who would rather dance than grapple in one of the drive-in theaters where Big Ed took *his* girls.

As it turned out, she was a skillful dancer, and made him feel good about his own inept footwork. They whirled and dipped like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and the four other dancers on the floor stopped to watch — and to applaud when the music stopped. The tune had been "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails."

"We've proved our point," she whispered. "We don't have to dance anymore. Let's sit and talk."

When the waiter came to their table, Jake was on the point of ordering two martinis, but she spoke first and asked for a Dr Pepper. He shrugged, relieved, and called for a 7-Up. He wondered if Big Ed had ever gone out with a girl who drank Dr Pepper. It would have undermined his sly stratagems.

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"I won't let the *Gazette* down," she said. "I may even find the key to Ramona MacDowell's heart."

"Don't worry about her. She's always frosty to beautiful women."

"I don't think it's that. I think she resents the fact that *you* hired me instead of your brother."

"If Big Ed had hired you, she'd have turned green."

"Maybe. But he *didn't* hire me. I think the thing she resents is that you jumped into your brother's shoes."

"Now listen, Anastasia, I don't want to hear another word about my brother's shoes. . . ."

She had done it! She had made him eloquent for the first time in his life.

He told her about his earliest memories of trotting behind Big Ike and Big Ed, only to be their butt. He told how they would pitch uncatchable baseballs and footballs at him, and how they would put him on rheumatic old mares that would amble right out from under him. He told how they would laugh at him, and how he learned not to cry but to grit his teeth and walk home to spend his afternoons reading books with Miss Becky and pretending not to care.

"They've got all they want, Daddy and Big Ed; so what's wrong with *me* running the *Gazette* for a change? Miss Becky and I are the only ones in the family who can read without moving our lips."

By now Anastasia was holding his hand and she had tears in her eyes. When he told her about Daddy's will leaving all his real estate to Big Ed, she blurted out:

"That's outrageous. You can get a lawyer to break that will."

Jake didn't know what it cost Benny to put these words into Anastasia's mouth. Benny had helped frame the will.

That was why Anastasia brightened suddenly and changed the subject.

"People tell me young Jake is the best of the Poppers."

"You must have talked to the people I've cleaned out at poker. I haven't met my match yet."

She flashed teeth at him. "*Now* you have. Poker, bridge, chess. Take your choice. I'll beat you at any one."

His heart expanded. He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out the crumpled paper with the hundred-dollar-a-year lease agreement scribbled on it.

"This is why Big Ed left Poppertown," he said.

"Only a hundred a year? Of course you're going to pay taxes."

"We didn't discuss that."

"I think you'd better, Jake. Get this drawn up by a good lawyer, and make sure it includes an agreement to keep up taxes on everything you lease. Otherwise, all he has to do is refuse to pay the tax himself and let the county grab the property. Would Big Ed do a thing like that to spite you?"

"If he was mad enough."

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She wouldn't let him kiss her good night at the door of her hotel room, but the look she gave him was almost a guarantee of better luck next time.

Dad was asleep on the daybed when he got home. He tiptoed past him and upstairs. He kissed Miss Becky on the forehead, and she smiled and sighed but didn't wake up enough to talk to him. That was a relief. He was too wound up to give her a play-by-play rundown of his night out with Anastasia Llewellyn.

Big Ed and Julio Madariaga drove into Poppertown at half past two on Sunday morning. They were neither of them drunk yet, but they were high enough on the bottle of red wine they had emptied to feel the need of more.

Poppertown was closed up tight at midnight Saturday, but Julio had a second cousin who ran an exclusive club in the basement of a secondhand store by the railroad tracks. It wasn't a whorehouse — just a place to drink and tell happy lies — but there were usually a few restless girls there, and upstairs rooms available for visiting cousins and their friends.

What they would do, said Julio, was get pleasantly bombed, and then — with or without girls — go upstairs, relax, and invite oblivion.

Tomorrow they would ambush Jake.

"You think we ought to ambush anybody on Sunday?"

"Go on," said Julio. "We'll just mangle him a little."

"What's got into you, Julio?" asked Big Ed. "Do you get kicks out of ambushing people?"

"Only smartasses. We had a smartass come to Galilee Valley five years ago. Screwed an uncle of mine out of five hundred acres. My uncle was too nice to lay for the bastard, but I wasn't."

"And you really got your jollies?"

"Why not?"

"Come on, Julio. You were always the sweet, gentle guy in your family."

"I still am, but not with smartasses. I tell you, Eduardo, it's something that has to be done. You won't get satisfaction any other way. Believe me. Get a lawyer and see what happens. If *you* don't punish these bastards, *nobody* will. We don't have to kill him."

"Let's try not to break any bones," said Big Ed.

"He won't miss one or two teeth."

"He might," said Big Ed. "But I'm with you all the way." He meant it. War was on: the war of the simple people against the complicated people, and he knew which side he had to be on.

When Jake came downstairs at seven in the morning, he found Big Ike sitting at the kitchen table, tieless and unkempt, chatting with Miss Becky through mouthfuls of buttered biscuit.

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"Sit down, Jake," said Big Ike, with an unusually warm smile. "We've got time for a chat before I go make myself pretty for church."

"Morning, Daddy," said Jake, a little defensively. Usually, when Big Ike spoke to him cheerfully, he was building up for a gem of sarcastic invective.

Miss Becky came up and kissed Jake.

"Do what your daddy says. Sit. I'll bring in bacon and poached eggs and toast. I hope you can get it down after a hard night on the town."

"I was a good boy," said Jake, sitting. "I can eat three eggs."

Big Ike filled Jake's glass from the orange juice pitcher.

"I've been wanting to talk to you, Jake. Your uncle Johnny sent me a box of books a few weeks ago. They were your granddad's, and Johnny thought they ought to go in the family library."

"They family *what*?" Jake laughed. "You mean the magazine rack over there?"

"Well, I couldn't tell Johnny I sold all the books our daddy left me." Big Ike chuckled. "It don't matter. We got a family library now. It's all in that little box Johnny sent me. I want you to take custody of it. O.K.?"

"Anything good in it?"

"I wanted to ask you about that. There's something called *The Essential Works of Saint Thomas Aquinas*. I tried to read it, and it reminded me of the plane geometry proofs I used to work out in high school. I used to be pretty good at that, but I'm a little rusty, and I can't figure out what all the words mean. Is it worth the time and effort? What's it all about?"

"Well, Aquinas was a medieval student of Aristotle who thought he could use Aristotle's method to work out some truths about God that aren't self-evident."

"Why would he want to do that? What's the matter with the Bible?"

"I think he would have said, 'That's a good question.' I'll tell you something about him, Daddy. One day when he was old and about to die, he had a vision. He wouldn't tell anybody exactly what it was, but he said it made all his writings irrelevant. He didn't write anymore after that."

"So why should I bother to study his writings?"

"I don't know, Daddy. I'll tell you why *I* bother. It's a privilege to be allowed to climb inside a brilliant, devout mind, and get a free ride."

"One other thing I wanted to talk about, Jacob. I want you to forgive me for never telling you I love you. I'm telling you now."

Jake's scalp tingled. "You didn't have to say it, Daddy," he lied. "Most fathers don't. You've done plenty for me."

"Say you forgive me anyway."

"I forgive you, Daddy. Maybe you'd better forgive me, too."

"For what?"

"You'll know when you find out."

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After church Miss Becky went into the kitchen to put together a new chicken recipe that would take over an hour to cook. Big Ike wanted to watch some news commentary shows on TV, so Jake put on a fleece-lined jacket and went out into the bright, cold air to stroll along the riverbank.

There wasn't much to look at. Houses and trees cut off any view of the mountains, and the river was just a trickle through rocks and pebbles. It wouldn't be a river again until spring, when the dams in the hills overflowed from the snowmelt.

Still, it spoke gently to the mind. Busy birds flitted in and out of underbrush. Fish, too small to catch, flashed silver bellies on their way up or down the dwindling runnels.

Walking was tricky. You had to be careful not to turn an ankle on a loose rock, or sink into mud that hadn't dried yet. That was one of the river's many attractions to Jake. Not many other people took this walk.

He stopped and knelt to pick up a stick of driftwood and set it floating down the main ribbon of river. It was a child's game, but who was watching?

At that moment he heard the crack of a dead twig behind him. He turned and saw *himself* coming toward him. It seemed as surprised at the sight of *him* as he was at the sight of *it*.

What he felt, instead of fright, was embarrassment. A self in a mirror had no mind of its own; you could make faces at it, pick your nose, stick out your tongue — and it would ape you without judging you.

This apparition was different. It was Jake's image, but it was its own self. It could judge. It could even resent Jake's scrutiny and his likeness to it. Jake felt he ought to say something to it, but he hadn't been properly introduced. Verisimilitude gave him no claim to familiarity.

The only reasonable thing to say was: "This riverbed isn't big enough for the two of us."

But he was too courteous for that, and so was his doppelgänger; so Jake tacitly surrendered, bowed, and headed for the bank of the river.

The doppelgänger waved to him, smiled politely, and continued sauntering up the riverbed.

Half a mile up the river, there was a five-acre basin called Jungle Bend. This was a lake every spring, a vast mud puddle in early summer, and a green and gold wilderness of reeds and underbrush in autumn.

"Used to come here with the gang when I was a kid and play Tarzan," said Big Ed.

"Who played the beasts of the jungle?" said Julio.

"Nobody did. We were all Tarzan. Once we had an old white collie bitch, and we used her as a polar bear."

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"A polar bear? In Tarzan?"

"Oh, well, what the hell," said Big Ed.

"You're sure your smartass brother walks through here?"

"Every Sunday after church. When it isn't raining."

"I hope we can find him in all this brush."

"Look, Julio. I'm not so sure I want to do this to Jake."

"Shit. I was just beginning to be proud you were my friend." Julio took a silver flask out of his pocket, raised it to his lips, swigged, shuddered, sighed. "Here. Take a little bit. It will give you that mean streak you need."

Big Ed swigged. "Wow! What is it? Straight alcohol?"

"Not quite."

"What do I need a mean streak for?"

"Look, it makes me proud to tell people my friend is number one in the Popper family. Then they say, 'Good old Big Ed; he wouldn't hurt a fly.' Well, Eduardo, you got to hurt flies to be number one. Your daddy hurt plenty of flies."

Big Ed took another swig and winced. "You don't want a friend. You want an institution."

"Institutions can be the best kind of friends. Duck in the bushes. Here he comes."

Julio reached down inside his sweater and pulled out two grocery store paper bags with eyeholes cut in them. Big Ed pulled out a ten-foot roll of clothesline he was carrying under his jacket. It had a running noose at one end. Big Ed had won prize money roping and tying calves in the Popper Whopper Rodeo.

They both donned their masks.

"I can't see a damn thing," said Big Ed.

"That's all right. I can see. You take off your bag and rope him from behind. Then duck down in the brush and fix your eyeholes. I'll go out and tie him up. You come out when you can see to walk."

As soon as the noose settled over Jake's shoulders, Big Ed gave it a sharp tug to tighten it and sat down out of sight. Julio took the end of the rope out of his hands and ran out into the clearing looking like a brown-paper Klansman.

Sitting on the ground with the tightened noose holding her elbows against her midriff was the most beautiful woman Julio had ever seen. The expression on her face was neither angry nor frightened, but amused. Julio felt foolish about his paper bag, and doffed it.

"You don't look like a rapist," she said. "But then, who does? Are you a rapist?"

"No, ma'am," said Julio, grinning and blushing.

Big Ed came out into the open, staggering a little, partly from the swigs out of the flask, partly because he hadn't been able to match the

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eyeholes to his eyes.

"Take your bag off," said Julio. "It isn't who we thought it was."

Big Ed uncovered and gasped at the sight of the creature he had caught.

"I know who you are," she said. "I've seen your picture. You're Mr. Edham Popper, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Are you a rapist?"

"No, ma'am. I'm a ropist."

She laughed. "A good one, too. Why did you rope *me*?"

"I thought you were somebody else, ma'am."

"I work for your newspaper, Mr. Popper."

"Call me Big Ed. How come I haven't met you?"

She smiled roguishly, and Big Ed's heart thumped. "You had flown the coop when I applied for the job. I'm going to do caricatures and feature stories for you."

Big Ed strolled up close to her, dreamily, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Well now, honey," he said, "We're going to have to get a whole lot better acquainted. Ramona can't hire anyone without my O.K., but I suppose she just couldn't get hold of me, and hired you temporarily until I came back. Don't lose any sleep over it, honey. We'll get along fine, you and me." He ran his hand up and down her upper arm.

• • •

Jake, sitting on the front porch of the California bungalow, looked up from his paper at the sound of a woman's cry. Through the underbrush he could see two men holding a woman who was struggling to break away. He picked up Miss Becky's bird-watching binoculars from the table beside him, and focused on the three. Then he dropped the binoculars on the floor and raced down to the riverbed and through the underbrush.

Big Ed and Julio let go of Anastasia when they saw him coming.

"Let her run," shouted Julio. "Here comes our fun."

Jake tried to run past them to where Anastasia was disappearing in a clump of low willows, but they both grabbed him. Riding and roping and brawling had given them iron muscles.

"Ha ha, Jake, you son of a bitch smartass," said Julio; "you got any papers you want us to sign?" He slapped him in the face with the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry, Jake, but Julio says you got to suffer," said Big Ed. He twisted Jake's arm behind his back.

Jake struggled. "What the hell were you doing to Anastasia?" he shouted.

"You don't get to ask questions, smartass," said Julio. "We're the good guys. We ask the questions."

From the willows came a familiar, commanding voice:

"Big Ed! Julio! Take your hands off my Jake."

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It was Big Ike, and he was marching through the underbrush toward them.

"Oh, Lordy," said Big Ed, dropping his grip on Jake. "Come on, Julio. I can't talk to the old man now. Let's get out of here."

Big Ed and Julio ran downriver toward where Julio's car was parked. Big Ike didn't even turn his head in their direction. When he was within ten feet of Jake, he was enveloped by what looked like a lavender dust cloud. When the dust cloud dispersed, Anastasia was there and Big Ike was gone.

"Don't ask questions," she said. "Hold me."

Jake held her. She sniffled on his shoulder.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Jake asked gently. "It helps some people. It never helped me, but it helps some people."

"Can you drive me into the hills?"

"Yes. It's pretty back there if you don't go in too far. Some people are snowed in on Popper Mountain."

"Let's go," she said. "Let's get snowed in, too."

It was a peculiar evening for Big Ike. He had been looking forward to some small talk with Benny when he got back to the hotel cupola, but Benny wasn't there. One thing Benny would never do was pretend not to be there even when he was really standing right under your nose but invisible.

Big Ike pushed the special Benny button wired to the arm of his chair. If Benny was anywhere in Poppertown, he would hear and answer as soon as it was convenient.

Feeling an unprecedented weakness in the backs of his knees, he sat down to wait for Benny's reply. After half an hour of silence, he realized that Benny was out of town.

He was too tired to feel either anger or anxiety. All he wanted to do was fall asleep. This had never happened to him in his life. Like Thomas Edison, he thrived on four hours sleep a night.

He decided to phone Miss Becky. but he was too sleepy to dial the number.

That was when the dream came, only it wasn't properly a dream. He had never had a dream in his life that wasn't too silly to remember more than a minute after he woke up.

This one wasn't silly at all, and he remembered it better than dinner with Miss Becky and Jake this afternoon.

It started with Daddy coming right through an unopened trapdoor in the floor, looking as fit and as towering as he had looked sixty years ago.

Big Ike had always had three feelings about Daddy: love, respect, and terror. When he was very little, he had either dreamed or remembered being on a mountaintop with Daddy

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pointing a pistol at his head and then dropping it and picking him up and kissing him. it was dim in his memory, and he was glad of that. It was the sort of thing he would never have discussed with anybody, and the less of it he remembered, the less of it he could talk about in case he ever had one too many drinks with some sympathetic buddy. And he didn't have time for the Freud crap.

"You made a pretty tolerable life for youself, boy," said Daddy, not sitting down. He had never been much of a sitter down.

"I guess," said Big Ike. "It wasn't me, though. It was Benny that made it."

"Of course," said Daddy. "It was Benny for me, too. Look. You haven't got a whole hell of a lot of time. You better start thinking about what you're going to do with Benny. There's only one of him, you know. You can't spread him around."

"I know that, Daddy. I guess I'll leave him to Edham. Big Ed. You used to call him Little Eddy."

"That's up to you. Is he a good boy?"

"He has his weaknesses. Benny will be good for him. The only trouble is, I don't know what to do with the other one."

"Baby Jakey? How is he?"

"He's more like you than Big Ed is. He thinks a lot."

"Well, you can't give him any of the real estate that's tied up in the will. And you say you aren't going to give him Benny. Haven't you piled up any assets of your own — assets that aren't mentioned in the will?"

"Plenty of money, plenty of securities. I never went in for buying real estate."

"Too bad. But you can give him money. Will he know how to use it?"

"Oh, yes, Daddy. He's the best poker player in town."

"That's my baby Jakey. He'll do all right, and the other baby will have Benny. That's a good arrangement, Son. I congratulate you. Look, don't blame me for that hard-nosed will. I didn't make it. It was passed on to me, and I passed it on to you."

"I know, Daddy."

"Do you feel kind of weak now?"

"I have peculiar spells. It's just come over me lately."

"Well, you've lived about as long as anybody lives. You have a right to a few spells. Don't panic, Son. You've got a good trip coming. I'll see you sooner than you think."

"Don't go yet, Daddy. How's Momma?"

Daddy was through the door and out of sight.

Snow was beginning to fall when Jake and Anastasia got to the foot of the last steep stretch leading to the old ghost town on top of Popper Mountain. Apparently this was the first snow of the season at this level. Jake's car had snow tires, but they

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wouldn't have helped him if the new snow had been settling on a foot or two of old hard-packed snow.

"This is worse than I thought," said Anastasia. I wouldn't kick and scream if you were to turn around and go back to the valley."

"I can't turn around here. There's a fifty-foot drop into a rocky creek on our right. If I come to a wide space in the road, I'll give it a try. But look, Anastasia, it will be a cold thirty-mile drive to the nearest eating place in the valley, and there's heavy snow down there, too."

"And what's the alternative?"

"Six miles ahead there's a bar and restaurant with a huge fireplace and a couple of grizzly bear rugs. It's a steep six miles, but I've got good tires. If the road's blocked between here and there, we can walk. There's a blanket in the trunk you can drape over your head."

Benny sighed. He and Big Ike had spent some of their happiest hours sitting in front of that huge fireplace. Maurice — the guy that ran the place — could make an elk steak almost edible.

Suddenly he remembered he was Anastasia, who had never been here before.

"Why would there be a place like that open in winter in a ghost town?" she asked.

"There's a sort of a trailer camp up here. Independent miners. The population thins out in winter, but a few stick it out all year."

"Doing what?"

"Mostly keeping an eye on each other. There isn't any panning when the creek is frozen, but there's some picking and shoveling and dynamiting. The guys that haven't struck any gold yet keep thinking maybe they will before the fair-weather miners start swarming up here in April."

"I thought your father owned the mountain."

"Not the mountain. Nobody really *owns* the mountain. Popper Mining sort of *runs* the mountain. We sell the miners all their equipment, and we lend them money, too. We'll buy their gold from them if they trust us, but we don't make an issue out of it. They're free to take it down and get a worse price for it somewhere else. Oh, we have a couple of claims of our own, too, but they aren't in anybody's way, and they barely break even. It's mostly for fun. Daddy likes to have a finger in every pie."

The sky had turned from pink to deep purple by the time they parked the car by a drift under an alpine fir tree and tramped through snow to Maurice's Alpine Bar and Grill.

Maurice recognized Jake and waddled out from his gilded-rococo-mirror-dominated lair behind the bar.

"Just in time, Jacob," he said, sarcastically. "Just in time to be snowed in. You won't be able to get back down that road tonight. How the hell did you get *up* it?"

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He shook hands with Jake and bowed to Anastasia, not knowing that she had drunk him under the table in three or four other forms — once as the Prince of Wales down from his Canadian ranch in 1929.

"Kick the snow off your shoes first," he said. "If you don't, it will melt and soak through. Then go sit on the sofa by the fire. I'll bring you a drink first and then get your room ready. What'll you have?"

"Dr Pepper for the lady, beer for me," said Jake. "And we don't want a room. We'll just snuggle down on those bear rugs in front of the fire. O.K., Anastasia?"

"O.K."

"Sure," said Maurice, looking a little puzzled. When Jake's brother came up here with a chick, he always wanted a room. Oh, well. He went back behind the bar to fix drinks.

Jake and Anastasia didn't talk. When Maurice brought their drinks, they sat, looking at the flames and listening to the red coals pop. Anastasia held out her hand and Jake took it.

It was after dark when Big Ike felt the tremor. At first he was sure it was an earthquake, but the fragile swan's-neck lamp on his desk was steady and still; so was the dangling chain that turned it on and off. If you just stamped your foot on the floor, the lamp would nod like an old man with Saint Vitus' dance, and the chain would swing.

"So what the hell kind of a tremor is this?"

He was about to call the desk and ask what was going on, when he heard the tinkle of breaking glass on the floor. It was his damn bifocals. You could *throw* the blasted things across the room and they wouldn't break, but a three-and-a-half-foot drop onto a carpeted floor had shattered them.

Without glasses Big Ike couldn't watch TV or even read a book — in case he *wanted* to read a book. And Benny wasn't anywhere around. What was he going to do?

He groped his way to the phone and called Miss Becky.

"I'd come calling on you," he said "only I'm blind. Why don't you come calling on me?"

"Blind?"

"I broke my damn glasses."

"You'll be all right. Anyway, we exhausted all our subject matter this afternoon. It will take us a week to think up new topics. Anyway, the old lady next door is coming over to play backgammon."

Big Ike wasn't ready to beg yet. "Maybe I could take a pill and get to sleep," he said. "You seen either of the boys?"

"No. Jake took off before dinner, and I haven't seen him since. I wasn't expecting to see Big Ed."

"Well, I'll bet one of them is out with that Anastasia what's her name. If you hear from Jake and he's got her, tell him to get her ass over here."

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"Isaac!"

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded, Miss Becky. Look, Anastasia isn't who or what she seems to be. I can't explain now. Listen, if your backgammon game is over before midnight, could you come over? I feel funny. Not just blind; funny all over."

"All right, darling." She hung up.

He groped for the switch, turned off the light, and slumped sadly in his chair. Nothing to look at. Nothing to see it with.

Suddenly everything lit up!

The sky outside was bright — not *blue*-bright, but silver and white and gold — with flecks of glittering green and red. It lit up the whole cupola.

Big Ike could see as well as he ever could when he was a boy and didn't need glasses. He ran to the window to test his eyes; he could see *better* than when he was a boy. He could see people walking down below. He could even recognize some of them, and that was eight stories down, by golly. There was old Sam Krantz, the insurance salesman, walking out of the chink's chop suey palace with his swivel-hipped redheaded secretary. Ike would have thought old Sam had better sense than to cheat on his wife in broad daylight.

But nobody down there seemed to know it was broad daylight. The cars in the streets had their headlights on. At the corner there was a man standing under a streetlamp, squinting at a road map.

The light from the lamp looked like a shadow compared to the diamond glare streaming all around it.

Big Ike also noticed that no one down there was casting a shadow.

He sat down again. His knees felt weak again. The sky around the cupola filled up with voices — bass, tenor, alto, soprano — singing something that sounded like "Surely He Has Borne Our Griefs" from Handel's *Messiah*. It *sounded* like it, but it *wasn't* it. Big Ike knew. He had sung it every Good Friday with the Poppertown Choral Society, back in the days when his baritone rang full and true.

He dialed Miss Becky again. He had to wait five rings before she answered, and when she did, her voice had a bite in it.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said, "but this is important to me. Would you go out on the front porch for a second and then tell me if you saw or heard anything."

She came back after a long thirty seconds.

"What was I supposed to see or hear? I heard a car horn honk."

"Was it dark?"

"Of course. It's black as pitch, and snowing. What's the matter, darling?"

"Don't worry about me, honey. I'll be all right."

"Go down to your room and get some sleep."

"I might," he said. "Good night."

He sat back and basked in the harmonies of the heavenly choir.

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Mama's voice rose above the singing ones.

"Don't be afraid, Little Ike," it said. "There may be a short time of pain. Discomfort. I remember how I struggled to breathe and thought it never would end. It does end. Quickly enough, baby. Quickly enough. Then the beauty begins. Don't be afraid."

"I wish Benny were here, Mama. I can't find him."

"We've sent for him, Little Ike. Don't worry."

He sighed, and let all the anxiety run out of his fingertips. All that mattered was the moment and the light and the singing, and he wished someone else could share it with him. Anything good is better shared.

Someone else was listening to the singing.

Benny never slept. At night in the dark, he sometimes lay still, contemplating zero, but consciousness hovered nearby, on call.

He, too, saw the lights, and knew what it meant. It was a call for him, and for Big Ike, and for only one other person: either Big Ed or Jake. No one else in the world would be able to see or hear it.

He had too much humility to say, "It *must* be for Jake and not Big Ed." He could only say wordlessly, "*Please* let it be for Jake," and hope he wasn't being presumptuous.

Benny looked over at Jake, snoring lightly on a grizzly bear rug, and wondered if he should wake him.

This was a tricky question. If the call was for Jake, the lights and music would wake him without Benny's help. Maybe not now, but soon. Certainly in time for the dangerous trip back to town.

If the call wasn't for Jake, then Big Ed might already have been awakened and lured by the lights and singing to Big Ike's cupola. Big Ike might already have put his hand on the head of his elder son and tried to give him a blessing that wasn't there.

It was just a formality, of course. Big Ike didn't really give the blessing. The blessing gave itself.

But the blessing had to be there!

If Big Ed really was the one, and not Jake, then Benny had to get back to town in a hurry, but he couldn't wake up Jake and tell him to warm up the car and brace for a wild ride.

There wasn't time.

What Benny had to do was dematerialize here and rematerialize in the hotel cupola in an amount of time too small to be measured.

But how could he find out which brother was the one? The obvious solution was to wake up Jake and see if he saw the lights, but that was against the rules, and for a good reason. What if Jake came out of a deep erotic dream and made a drowsy grab for Anastasia? Nobody would blame him, but it would be a false step in a dance that was meant to be perfect. Benny

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had never participated in a spoiled Ritual of Blessing. He didn't dare contemplate such a thing.

He looked up toward the roof, which was of course transparent to his eyes, and, he hoped, to Jake's.

The display in the sky was one of incandescent spirit, not of mere stars and planets. Benny had seen this dance more times than he had ever cared to record, but it still made him tremble with awe and joy.

It consisted of two great circles of luminous spheres — a wheel inside a wheel — the inner one turning clockwise, the outer counterclockwise and almost scraping the horizon.

It was calling him to dance. That meant there was no hurry. It still might want Big Ed instead of Jake, but not right away. In the meanwhile, through the medium of the dance, it would tell him what to do and how to do it, because no two successive rites were ever exactly the same. Even Benny needed helpful hints.

He didn't go all the way up to where the lights (not precisely spheres, but dazzling figures resembling men or women when your eyes got used to them) whirled and sang. In order to join them and get back anytime this week, he would have to go faster than light. He could do that trick, but preferred not to, since he would have to return in a cloud of sparks that might incinerate the Alpine Bar and Grill.

On the other hand, he couldn't dance with appropriate élan on the floor without bumping into chairs and tables and barstools.

To get up to within three feet of the ceiling, where there was room to whirl and swoop, he had to dematerialize. But not all the way; it was no fun to dance invisible. You didn't belong to the dance if you couldn't be seen by the other dancers.

He turned himself into a translucent, faintly luminous Anastasia with a swirling golden robe, and soared aloft.

Whatever Jake had been dreaming went out of his head the second he opened his eyes. He was tingling with a chaste erotic love (if such a thing was imaginable), but for half a minute he couldn't think who or what it was that he loved. He couldn't think where he was. He wasn't under a roof. He was under a sky dominated by two circles of singing planets — one revolving clockwise, the other counterclockwise. Each planet (but how could there be so many planets?) was bigger than Venus and smaller than the moon, and they were all brighter than either. Some were as red as Mars; most were between platinum and pale gold. And they sang! There were basses deep enough to rattle windows, and sopranos high enough to shatter crystal.

Dancing in the middle of the circle, but lower down — almost reachable by a long-handled hay rake —

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was a figure that was and wasn't Anastasia. The figure wore a swirling golden robe, and it was translucent. Whenever it — she — passed in front of a planet, you could see it right through her.

"Anastasia," he called.

She swooped down to him and took both his hands. *Her* hands were weightless.

"It's beautiful," he said. "it's like the rose of souls in Il Paradiso. What are the singing lights?"

"Oh, friends of mine."

"Is Aquinas there? Saint Thomas? Dante saw him."

"Let me see," she said.

She broke away from him and started to whirl upward again, but suddenly the singing stopped and the lights disappeared, and all that could be seen up there was the faint shifting reddish light cast by the fire on the steep sloping ceiling of the Alpine Bar and Grill.

"Where did they go?" he asked.

She started to laugh. "Oh, Jake. Jake. They conveyed their message. That was all they had to do. And you saw them, didn't you? That means you're IT, Jake. You're It! It's YOU! It isn't Big Ed after all. Hurry and get your warm clothes on. We have to drive to town to see your father."

"We'll get caught in the snow."

"THEY won't allow it, Jake. Trust me. Trust THEM."

"Why do we have to rush?"

"Your father's time has almost come. He has to give you his blessing. Hurry. You don't have to understand yet."

Benny had a delicate demand to make at this point. Having been Big Ike's chauffeur for over half a century, in all kinds of weather and over all kinds of terrain, he knew he could get the car from here to the Popper Hotel faster than any other living creature. Therefore, he would have to insist on driving, and since he was now in the heart of male chauvinist country, Jake would undoubtedly refuse to let him (her) touch the wheel.

Of course Jake had seen the lights and music, and was certainly emotionally ready by now for other strange changes. If she suddenly became a chauffeur — George Raft, say — wearing a visored cap and leggings and a tight jacket with brass buttons, wouldn't that outmaneuver male chauvinism?

No. Jake would want to know where Anastasia was, and if George Raft said, "*I'm* Anastasia," what would happen to Jake's inner balance? He was charged with erotic love. He needed that charge right now; later it would undergo a metamorphosis into a higher kind of love. But not if Anastasia suddenly became George Raft. Jake didn't swing that way. A spell would be shattered.

Jake had to turn his back to sit and tie his shoelaces. At that moment Anastasia materialized and returned in a second and a half as herself in

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chauffeur's uniform. Visored cap, cavalry breeches, and slick leather boots enhanced her femininity.

Jake gasped when he saw her.

"I never saw a quicker change."

"I'm full of quick changes," she said.

"You look like a chauffeur in a movie."

"I *am* a chauffeur. The best you ever knew. You'll have to let me take the wheel."

Jake frowned. Then he shrugged. Then he laughed.

"Well, anyone who can hobnob with singing planets — Well, who am I to contradict an—"

"Don't say it. Don't use words unless you know what they mean."

Big Ike didn't know how long he had been asleep, but when he woke up, the lights and the singing were gone. He could dimly see that his reading light was on, but without his glasses he couldn't read by it or even tell time by it. His table clock had big black hands, but not big enough nor black enough for his blind eyes.

He phoned Miss Becky again.

"I don't like to be a pest, Miss Becky, but I can't even see the hands on my damn clock. What time is it?"

"Quarter to twelve."

"That's a long backgammon game you got there."

"That was over a long time ago. I was just waiting for Jake to come home and drive me to the hotel."

"Where's he?"

"I don't know."

"Call Big Ed."

"I don't think he's back in town yet. If you want, I'll call the Madariagas in Galilee Valley, but even if I get Ed, it will take him an hour to get to Poppertown."

"Honey, I think you better get him anyway. I have a feeling I'm on my way out."

"Don't say that. I'll phone Doc Glass and then I'll walk over, but don't kill yourself with crazy thoughts."

"Let that poor old sawbones sleep. He can't do anything for me now. I'm too healthy. I can run all the way up and down the hotel stairs."

"What do you mean, you're on your way out?"

"I told you about the light in the sky. Well, I better begin at the beginning. First I had a visit from Daddy. Then there were all these singing lights in the sky. . . ."

"Singing?"

"Singing. Then Mama dropped in and said, 'Don't be afraid,' and went back out again. So that's how I know I'm on the way out. But otherwise I'm fine, Miss Becky. I don't need a doctor. All I need is you and those boys over here before it's too late."

"Listen, darling. You hold on. Hear? I'll leave a note for Jake and I'll try to get Big Ed on the telephone, and then I'll put on my high boots and fur-

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lined coat and run right over. Hold on for me."

Chauffeur Anastasia parked the car in back of the hotel. Arm in arm, she and Jake waded through a foot of fresh snow to the tradesmen's entrance.

"I wish I'd put my galoshes in the car this afternoon," said Jake.

"Wait till we get to the service elevator," she said. "I'll provide fleece-lined slippers for your wet feet."

They had the elevator to themselves. Anastasia stopped it between the first and second floors.

"Now, Jacob," she said, "if we're going to be stuck with each other, you're going to have to get used to a lot of quick changes."

She vanished.

Big Ed appeared where she had just been. He was wearing patched jeans and a fleece-lined corduroy jacket and a white Stetson like tonight. He was also wearing pink, fleece-lined slippers, which Big Ed wouldn't have accepted as a gift.

"Big Ed" took off the slippers and handed them to Jake.

"Just your size," he said. "and they're dry. Take off your wet shoes and socks and step into these."

Jake was tongue-tied. Nothing could be more repellent than the thought of an Anastasia who could become Big Ed at will. He frowned at the slippers.

"Big Ed" seemed to read his mind. The apparition vanished. Jake hoped it would come back as someone else — preferably a woman — but if it had to be a man, please, not Big Ed.

It reappeared as Big Ed, only this one was wearing floppy old leather boots caked with dried manure. Big Ed had three or four pairs like that.

"Now listen, Jake," said "Big Ed," with an unusually loving smile. "Let's get something straight before I press the UP button again. You know I'm not Big Ed, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And I'm not Anastasia Llewellyn, either. You know that, too, don't you?"

"I haven't let myself meditate on it. Who are you, then?"

"My name is Benison."

"What do you look like as Benison?"

"Just what you saw me look like between changes. Can you still love me?"

"Yes, but's it's a damn peculiar love. What if you turned into Anastasia again, and I somehow mustered up the gall to kiss you goodnight, and you turned back into Big Ed in the middle of the kiss?"

"What would you do?"

"Throw up, I guess."

"Why? Some brothers kiss each other. Don't you love your brother?"

"I guess so, but what I feel for Anastasia isn't brotherly love. And I know lots of brothers who *don't* kiss each other. Love for a man is a differ-

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ent thing. If you can't be Anastasia, couldn't you be another woman?"

"No. I have to be Big Ed when we go to see Big Ike."

"He's a good old man. I don't like to see him deceived."

"I have to, Jake. Your daddy thinks it's up to him to give away his Benison, but he can't *do* that. I give myself away. Always. Listen, there's an alternative to trickery. I can use power. I can shatter every pane of glass in the cupola."

"I guess trickery is better than that. What about Big Ed? Is he expecting to get you?"

"He's expecting to get a blessing, but he doesn't know what kind of blessing. If he thinks it's a blessing in the ordinary sense of the word, he won't miss it"

"No, said Jake, "but doesn't he have a right to get what's coming to him?"

"*I'm* not coming to him. The dancing lights didn't sing for him; they sang for you. They ratified my choice. If you hadn't seen and heard them, I would have dumped you and found Big Ed."

"So in the end, even *you* don't choose."

"So in the end, no one does."

Big Ed was drunk when Miss Becky reached him by phone in Galilee Valley. The connection was terrible. Even when she shouted the unspeakable words, "Your father is dying," his only answer was, "It ain't fit out for man nor beast." He seemed to think this was the funniest rejoinder of the season.

Finally Julio got on the phone. He was drunk, too. "I'm sorry," he said, "but we gotta teach the bastards. We can't leddum geddaway with that shit."

Then Julio's wife, Marguerita, came to the phone and apologized for the men. She was sober and concerned, and promised to do what she could to get Big Ed dried out and on the road.

"Now you listen to me, Big Ed," said Big Ike. "You're *my* boy, and Jake's Miss Becky's boy. You know what I mean?"

"That's how I always saw it," said Big Ed.

"Well, kneel down, so I can put my hand on your head."

"Big Ed" knelt, and Big Ike ran fingers through his hair. "You got thick hair, like all *my* family. Jake's got soft hair, like Miss Becky's family."

He moved his fingers from hairline to jawline. "Scratchy," he said. "Marry a woman who'll let you grow a beard like your granddaddy. Miss Becky never would let me. I'll bet Jake *couldn't*. But he's wise and quiet and good," said Big Ike. "You know that?"

"Yes, Daddy. And slick."

"All right, Son. He's gonna *need*

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that. And don't hurt him."

"He's too smart to let me, Daddy."

"I hope so. Now, we're coming to the embarrassing part, but I got through it when *my* daddy's time came; so you can get through it with me. Put your face close to me so I can kiss you on the lips."

"O.K., Daddy." Bristly chin scraped bristly chin.

"I love you, Big Ed," said Big Ike after the kiss.

"I love you, too, Daddy."

"Next thing I got to do is give you my blessing. He better be here. He's been out gallivanting, but he's always here when he really has to be." Big Ike raised his voice. "Son, I give you my Blessing. Blessing, attach yourself to my son."

"It's good to make your acquaintance," said Benny, in the deep, rich voice of a television evangelist.

"Same here," he answered himself in Big Ed's voice.

Just then an elevator door opened on the floor below, and high heels began clicking up the metal steps to the cupola. "That's your mama," said Big Ike. "You two clear out of here for ten minutes so I can talk to her alone."

Jake went to the door and waited for "Big Ed," but "Big Ed" was invisible. He went out the door and closed it so he could say a word to Miss Becky out of Big Ike's hearing. He didn't know whether Benny was at his elbow or not. It made him a little jumpy. Was he going to have to put up with this all his life?"

Miss Becky was halfway up the stairs.

"Don't rush in there, Miss Becky. I have to tell you something. Daddy gave me his blessing, but he thinks he gave it to Big Ed."

She looked at him for five long seconds, with a frown above and a half-smile below.

"Did you deceive him, Jacob?"

"Yes and no. I didn't tell him I was Big Ed, but I didn't tell him I wasn't."

"Well, he should have given the blessing anyway, but I suppose he's happier thinking he didn't. I want you both to be happy."

"Big Ed won't be happy."

She sniffed. "Big Ed won't even find out if he doesn't sober up and get here. I called him in plenty of time."

"What if he does get here?"

"You'll have two new things, Jacob: an enemy and a blessing. If I were you, I'd stay out of sight. What are you going to do?"

"I think I'll just sit on these steps and wait till you come out."

"That won't be for a long time."

"I can wait."

"What if your brother comes?"

"He won't know what has happened until he talks to Daddy. After he goes through that door, I'll go away somewhere. If you don't see me, don't worry. I'll phone you."

She went into the cupola and Jake

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sat down. Someone sat down beside him.

It was Anastasia! Did she *really* belong to him now? His heart thumped.

"Down boy," she said. "We're going to have to find you a lovable mortal wife. You can't go panting after Anastasia."

"Then why *be* Anastasia?"

"Anastasia has a job at the *Gazette*. She can't quit being Anastasia without giving proper notice. Come on, let's go out and walk in the snow. Your mother doesn't expect to find you here. Big Ed will be back in half an hour."

Miss Becky and Big Ike wasted few words. They held hands and silently juggled with fifty years of mutual thoughts that floated in the room like gas balloons and bumped lightly into each other from time to time.

Big Ed came in without knocking.

"Here I am, Daddy," he said. "I'm sorry, Mama. I was bombed. Forgive me, Mama. Please."

"All right. You came anyway."

She didn't want to watch this scene. "I have to go to the bathroom," she lied. "I'll trust you two to keep an eye on each other."

After she had gone, Big Ike said, "what do you mean, you were drunk? You don't sound drunk now, and you didn't sound drunk at all when you were in here half an hour ago. What did you mean when you said, 'Here I am, Daddy'?"

"I came to get your blessing, Daddy. That's all. And to do anything you want me to do."

"What the hell are you talking about? I *gave* you my blessing!"

"How could you, Daddy? I just got here."

"I may be half-blind, but I know your voice."

"Jake can imitate my voice."

"I ran my fingers through that wiry hair of yours."

"He could have used a wig."

"It wasn't a wig. And he had a stubbly chin."

Jake could have figured a way to fake it. You know Jake. He's — he's *slick*. Julio calls him a — a smartass. Daddy, couldn't you give *me* a blessing, too?"

"Come here," said Big Ike. "Kneel down. Put your head on my shoulder." His voice shook and his eyes glistened.

Big Ed knelt and put his head on Daddy's shoulder. Big Ike touched his hair and chin.

"You — you're Big Ed, all right. Look, Son, — look — I can leave you my *love*. I would have sworn it was you that was here."

"It had to be Jake. Is love all you've got left?"

"And all my real estate. You know that, Son."

"The son of a bitch has a finger on *that*, too."

"What can I say, Son?" Big Ike patted him on the head. "Jake won't strip you clean; you can count on that.

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Be friends with him."

"No, Daddy. I'll take him to court over that real estate. I'll get the best lawyers in the state."

"Jake's got the best lawyer anywhere. His name is Benny. Benison."

"I'll kill him, Daddy." Big Ed was weeping now. "I'll lay for him and kill him."

"Poor boy," said Big Ike. He was weeping, too. "Poor boy."

Big Ike didn't die that night or the next, but he sank closer and closer to it.

Big Ed had apparently gone back to sulk in Galilee Valley. Jake moved cautiously through town, checking in every morning to see what needed to be done at the *Gazette,* spending his evenings at home chatting with Benny, who still favored the form of Anastasia.

Anastasia was the one who brought Jake the message that Miss Becky wanted him out of town.

"But I'll have to be here for the funeral, when the time comes."

"That's just what she doesn't want. Big Ed will come to the funeral, and he'll probably bring a gun. That's not the kind of background she needs at a time like that."

"Of course not," said Jake.

"Your mother says you have a cousin in Butte, Montana."

"Near Butte. Yes, he has a nice spread and a bunch of pretty daughters."

"He called your mother and asked if you could visit him. He wants someone to catalog the books in his library. He spoke of you as a bright young man.

"Good. He's a bibliophile. I've always wanted to browse through that library. I'll go tomorrow."

"She also said that Big Ed never stays angry at anyone for very long."

"I know that. I was counting on it."

"But stay away at least a year, for your mother's sake."

"And what shall I do for your sake?" he asked.

"Fall in love with one of those beautiful daughters. Marry her. Keep the fortune in the family."

"And what will you be doing for me?"

"Laying a legal foundation for the benevolent empire of Jake Popper. It's what I did for you daddy, and his daddy before him, and so on and so on."

"Benevolent empire? That somehow stinks of Mammon."

"It does, doesn't it?" She laughed. "That's one of the reasons the lights sang for you. The empire is here for somebody to grab, and if you don't fill the vacuum, some overambitious Daddy Warbucks *will.* Better us than him, Jake. *We've* listened to the lights. Now, go phone your Butte."

"Oh, dammit, I love you," said Jake. "Will you ever get weekends off while you're laying this foundation?"

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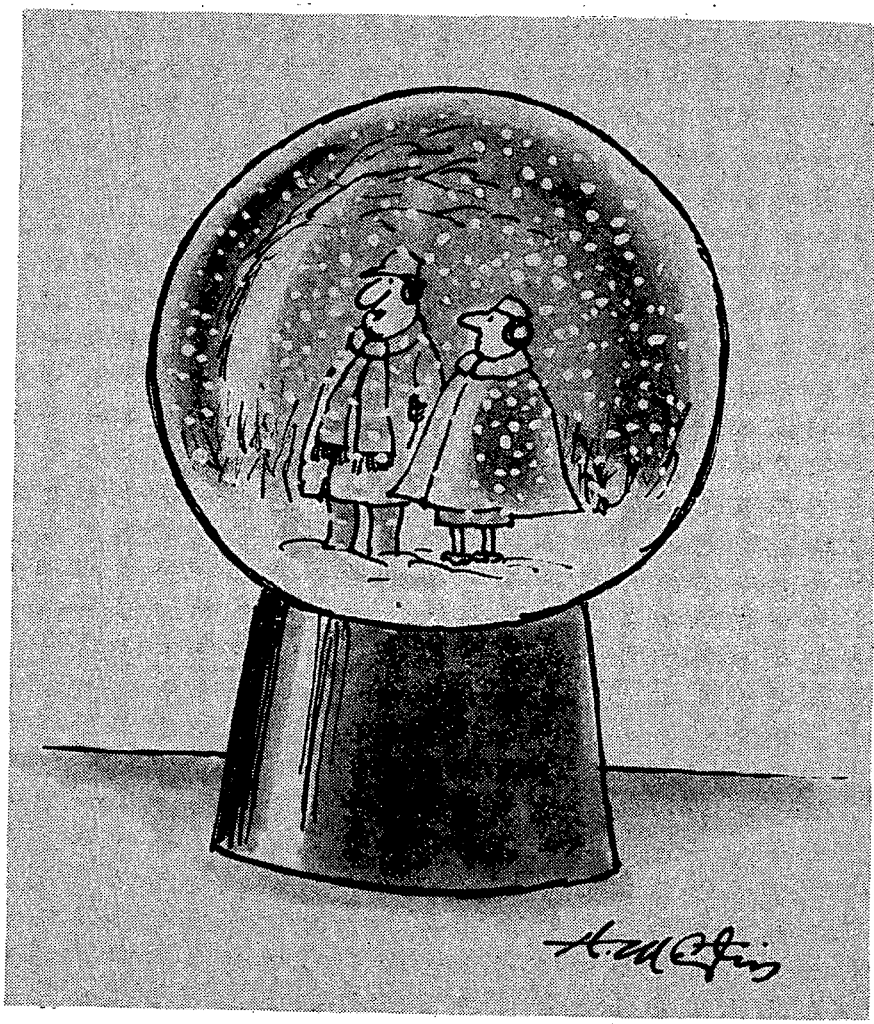
"Of course."

"A plane will get you to Butte in a couple of hours."

"All right. I'll visit you. But not as Anastasia."

"As who, then?"

She laughed. "How about the Hunchback of Notre Dame?"



"Wouldn't it be nice, Alice, if somehow we could freeze this moment in time?"

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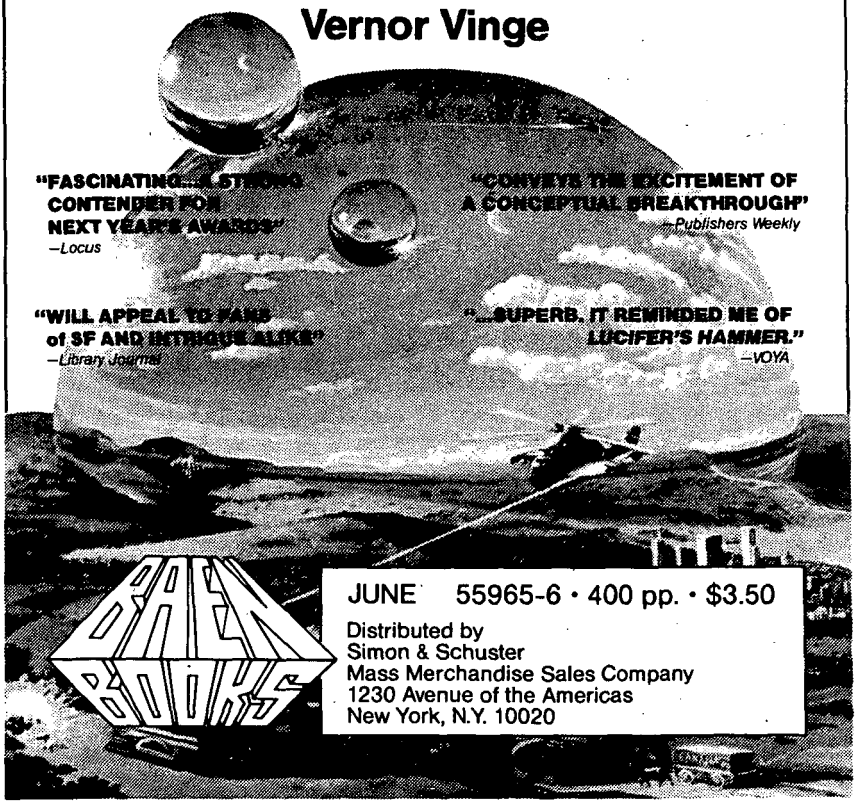
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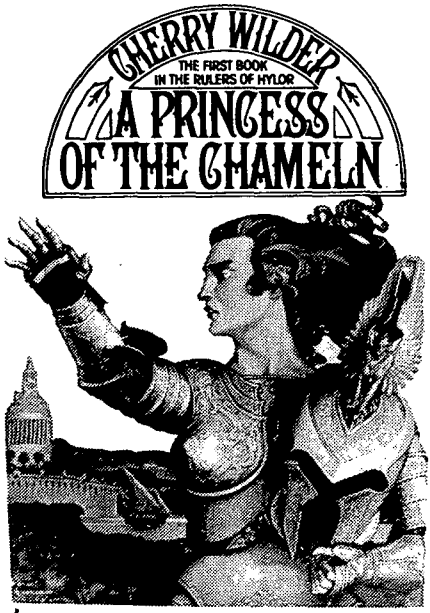

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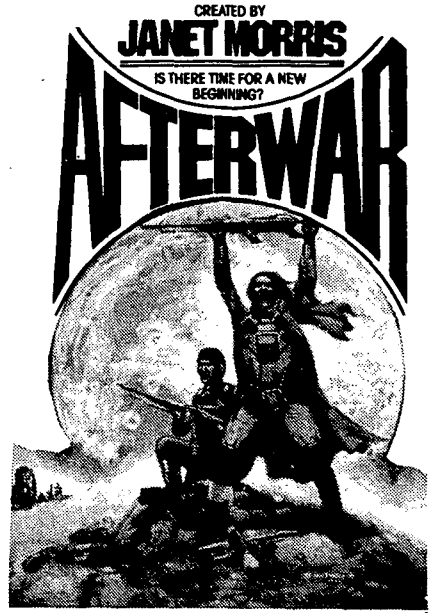

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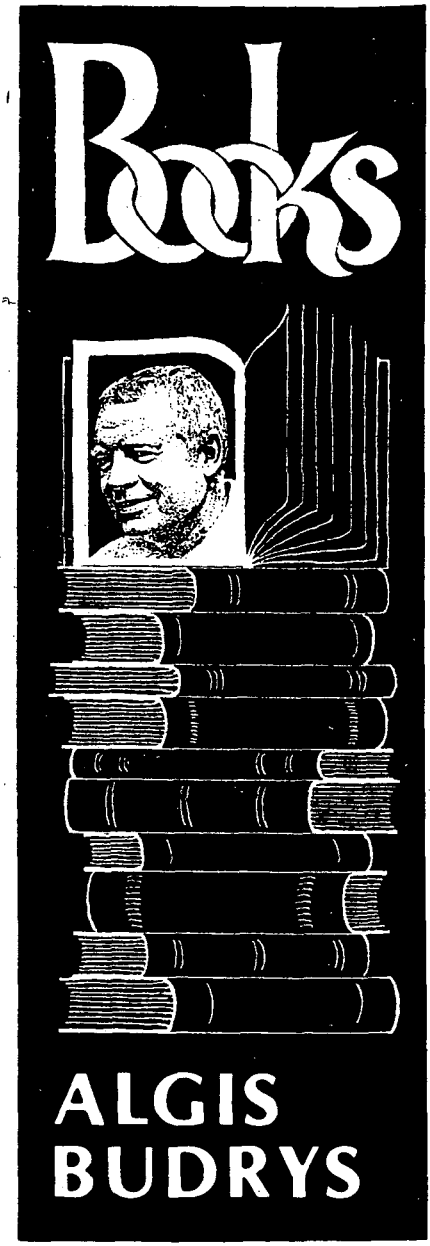
A Separate Star, Frank Kelly Freas, Greenswamp Publications. 8½ x 11 paper, $14.95; bound library edition, $24.95, slipcased limited edition, $39.95

Niven's Laws, Larry Niven, PSFS/Owlswick, $12.00

Light Years and Dark, Michael Bishop, Ed., Berkley, $8.95

Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys, Southern Illinois University Press, $19.95.



We are going to talk this time about books that might, or might not, sell many copies for various reasons. But they are books whose reason for existence lies outside the bounds of commercial publishing. It is also possible we may discuss art.

Frank Kelly Freas has been a major SF illustrator since the earliest 1950s, and to date holds 10 "Best SF Artist" Hugo awards as well as countless other honors. Very few can rival him in terms of longevity, in number of major illustrative projects, or in breadth of activity. So when he talks, it pays to listen.

The title of his new art book comes from a Kipling poem, "When Earth's Last Picture is Painted," which begins

> When Earth's last picture is painted
> and the tubes are twisted and dried,
> When the oldest colours have faded,
> and the youngest critic has died...

and ends

> And only the Master shall praise us,
> and only The Master shall blame;

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And no one shall work for money,
and no one shall work for fame,
But each for the joy of the working,
and each, in his separate star,
Shall draw the Thing as he sees It
for the God of Things as They are!

That's a pretty good (and subtly complex) statement applicable to more arts than just the graphic. If it seems to romanticize the matter, well, in truth the matter is intensely romantic.

Art can't really be explained, and people who do art are explicable only to other artists, and then not very much. Being involved in criticism, I'm constantly aware that while what I'm doing is valuable and important — to me certainly, to others apparently — it's also pernicious in one particular sense. Writing about pieces of art helps perpetuate the idea, endemic among non-artists, that you can do art by thinking about it.*

In this book, and in its predecessor, *The Art of Science Fiction,* one of SF's finest illustrators displays some of his work over the years, couching it in color plates and black-and-white. In the accompanying text, much of it hand-lettered in his calligraphy, Freas explains why you can see in his work some of the things he says are there.

**So I wait, with some impatience, for the day when the critics of criticism have been stilled, and we have overcome the pernicious idea that the way to do criticism is to think.*

What he is saying, when you look at the total statement, is that art expresses itself willy-nilly; that craftsmanship, only, is susceptible to rationality. But the procedures of craftsmanship consist of making moves which are themselves bits of art, so that what seems solid and comprehensible, while you discourse on technique, actually has moondust for its fundamental particle and is as mysterious as ever.

Huh? Well, then, let me put it this way:

The riposte to the classic question "Where do you get your ideas?" is "Where do you get your arms and legs?", and that superficial remark is actually a way of indicating that how we walk and gesture is finally a matter of how our muscles are inserted, one in another, among the attachments of our bones, and of the manner in which our biochemistry manages the electrochemical processes that move them. We are of a certain shape and metabolism, and these are our instruments. Furthermore, we resonate willy-nilly to passing air streams and other terrestrial vibrations; we do not live pure in a pure condition, we cannot claim that even the most painstakingly directed action is entirely the action we desire and only the action we desire. We can chose whether or not to walk or to embrace, but we cannot ultimately choose how we do it.

So you do not do art by thinking

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about it. You do art — you find that you have tired of remaining in one position and some part of your body has shifted while your attention was elsewhere — and then you think about it.

A freshet of questions arises in your mind, something along the order of how does this look, what does this mean, where is its ideal ... how might one communicate that? It's very difficult to conceive of an uncommunicated art. I find, in fact, that I can't do it; when I try, I conceive not of an art but a surly, baffled individual who claims to practice it and is secretly terrified. That is, I can't even approach the possibility, and must displace it. So, as a person with my arms and legs, I find that in my universe there is no way to discuss art without entailing communication, any more than there is way to discuss time without implying space ... or vice-versa; there is no communication that is not in some sense a work of art.

For those who were born unable not to communicate, adolescence is a time of learning how to communicate acceptably. In the world of graphic art, there is the matter of learning what the human eye/brain will perceive as representations of form and color. These are different from what the artist first sees in the artist's own mind, and many years of craftsmansly study must be devoted to this process of learning how to translate.

A large part of Kelly's written text in *A Separate Star* touches on this aspect of his art: the materials chosen in order to accomplish a particular effect, the techniques applied. So this aspect of the book addresses itself particularly to the young artist, while in a larger sense addressing itself to anyone with any interest in how truth and beauty may be made to appear where once there was only blank space.

Then, there is the matter of melding graphic art with written text — that is, the doing of illustrations. This is a form of partnership that sprang to importance with the development of mass literature. Although its roots go back to dimmest antiquity, its flowering is no more than one or two centuries in progress, and every generation sees a fresh evolution of it. Among all the graphic artists, the illustrators have the liveliest time and possess the quickest moves.

No question, Frank Kelly Freas knows more about illustrative rationales than any other science fiction artist. Part of that derives from his intense creative partnership with his wife, Polly Freas, who can take a story manuscript and anatomize its content with the dexterity of a surgeon. Part of it derives from Kelly's unending interest in how things work. Part of it arises from the fact that he's a stone hopeless SF fan; even after all these decades, he embraces each new story and writer with the same glee

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most of us began to moderate after the first year or two. Not that he's naive about it; many a Freas illustration proves to have put more into the story than the author was able to.

That aspect of his art is also spoken of in Kelly's writing here, and so we also have a short course in illustration. Already, it becomes clear that this book and its predecessor are of immense value as teaching texts.

But this will at first be irrelevant, for the first impact is not in the writing but in the artwork that impinges directly on the eye. And here, of course, in the rich color and the crisp black-and-white, is the entrance to the gossamer labyrinth; the eye is drawn in, and the brain follows. Beauty occurs, and truth, and fascination.

You can reason out, guided by the written text, what it is you are seeing. That is, you can approximate an understanding of the craftsmanship. But the fact is you can tell a Kelly Freas graphic a mile away, and that would not be true if craftsmanship were all there were to it. The craftsmanship part is the part anyone can learn, provided only that one is among those who cannot abstain from communicating. There are several illustrators around today who have obviously learned as much of that part of Kelly Freas as they are able to grasp, but they are not like him at any distance beyond six inches.

It's ultimately in the arms and legs, you see. If he were a dancer, you could learn steps from him, but you could only admire the moves. And that awareness, too, is what comes off the page in this book, but you will not find it anywhere in the words.

Kelly and Polly — who had a great deal to do with the inception of Starblaze Books, but have since chosen their own course — are Greenswamp Publications. If you cannot find the book in a store, the address for ordering it is

Greenswamp Publications,
4216 Blackwater Road
Virginia Beach, VA 23457

The address for *Niven's Laws,* a very nicely produced hardbound volume, is

Owlswick Press
Box 8243
Philadelphia, PA 19101

The book is published by Owlswick for the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, which has put together this volume of short Larry Niven pieces. Most were occasioned by appearances at various conventions over the years, where Niven as Guest of Honor has promulgated, or served as the focus of, some of the most outrageous anecdotes since anyone but Jerry Pournelle, his frequent collaborator.

Fittingly, there is a Pournelle introduction for this collection of speeches, epigrams, outright gags, reminiscences and — in a section worth the full price — ten short-

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shorts set in the Draco Tavern, where the Chirpsithra aliens congregate.

Niven initiates, directs and completes his thoughts while most other people are still reaching for the shift lever; I think it likely his head is situated in a bubble of hyperspace. Readers of his novels and other long stories will be aware that they are packed with ideas. What we find in *Niven's Laws,* with its very swift, very short takes, is the essence of all that. The Draco Tavern stories, for example, almost demand an IQ up above 150 or they become incomprehensible; they are not so much stories as they are notions, and they are not so much notions as they are fundamental propositions about how the universe is to be perceived. In a field which declares it has many ties to rationality and precise investigation of phenomena, intellect and its exercises become an art form in themselves, and its practitioners are justified in taking occasions to display their technique.

In connection with the pieces collected here, the word "dazzling" comes to mind, but it's not the right word. Taken as a whole, the book is self-indulgent, as these things tend to be. And in common with most other artists, Niven connects well with some sorts of minds and not so well with others, IQ irrelevant to the phenomenon. But taken as a resource —and cetainly taken as a quintessential gem by those with whom Niven as ingenuist does connect — this is a very likely buy. Some of this material is available elsewhere, but not as readily, nor as permanently and attractively produced.

There is among us this ongoing awareness of SF as a phenomenon. At the same time that we continue to generate new SF works and enjoy them for themselves, we devote an enormous amount of attention to why they are the way they are, and what they mean.

As one of the persons caught up in this fascination, I can testify that there is no reasoning one's way out of it. Once one begins to think along these lines, clearly there is no escape, and I long ago shrugged my shoulders and settled back to watch myself tumbling along to wherever it was all going to take me. I note I have many companions on this peregrination, what with the steady publication of volumes and essays on SF, the existence of the Science Fiction Research Association and the Science Fiction Oral History Association, and the appearance of anthologies designed not only to contain entertaining stories but to arrange their contents into a pattern supporting some didactic purpose.

I think what does it in my case is the conviction that the emergence and proliferation of American-type SF on the world's newsstands in this century represents some sort of major phenomenon. It may be literary, it

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may be sociological, it certainly partakes of both attributes, and with that it drags in psychology, politics, and — as we have been flirting with it recently — perhaps even religion. Somehow, it does not seem to be enough to just write more stories. It seems important to impose some sort of systematic examination of the process. The chances are low that we, caught up in its midst, will ever actually understand it. At the same time, I am utterly loath to let it conduct itself unescorted into the care of future appraisers. I do not trust their cold eye, and there is no way they can reassure me. Again, it's plain I'm not alone in this feeling.

SF is more than literature.* This is obvious when it's examined as a whole, because clearly by the standards of the sort of person who first coined the term "literature," much SF text fails to qualify at any acceptable level. We can postulate all we want to that SF has different rules; this merely affirms the verity of the accusation, and it brings us right back to where we were, because the next questions are: "Why does it?" and "So what?"

The latest address of these matters comes from Michael Bishop, one of the prominent newer writers and in this case the editor of an anthology with an avowed didactic purpose, *Light Years and Dark,* subtitled "Science Fiction and Fantasy for Our Time."

There are forty-one stories here, plus four poems by Robert Frazier and three John Sladek parodies, all set in train behind Bishop's introduction, whose burden is that there is something significant in the work of SF writers who "came of literary age after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy."

Thus we are immediately tied into sociology and — because this breakpoint coincides psychically with the failure of Eisenhower's U-2 administration, with the willingness of the public to believe in a "missile gap," and with the fiasco at the Bay of Pigs — with the shattering of technological optimism in America, and the resulting panic that may have in some way prompted Kennedy's assassination and certainly resonates with it. No question but that most of the artists whose work is collected here must have been profoundly affected by the events of that chronology.

Whatever, here is a roster of major SF creators who deliberately do not include among them Heinlein, Asimov or Clarke, or even Silverberg

It's time once again to remind us that by SF I don't mean sf, or science fiction. I mean speculative fiction, which subsumes both fantasy and science fiction. Science fiction, like fantasy, in turn contains genres, among them the classic Gernsback-derived scientifiction, or stf, pronounced stef and declinable — thus, stefnal, stefnist, stefnism, etc., courtesy of long-time fan Jack Speer, who coined the concept in the 1940s, before it was needed.

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and Ellison. (Roster does include Ballard, Wolfe, Zelazny, Wilhelm, Spinrad, Lafferty, Le Guin, Niven, and Disch, among people who were well along by the time of, say, Martin Luther King's killing, as well as a host — a goodly, impressive host — of those whose work was born after Bobby Kennedy died.)

The concept of a "Modern" science fiction was crystallized by the venerable Healy-McComas anthology, *Adventures in Time and Space* (1946), whose content was drawn almost entirely from the *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine edited by John W. Campbell, Jr. Other anthologies confirmed it — notably those of Groff Conklin and Martin (the wrong) Greenberg. They drew their validity from the fact that their contents worked as art — the entertainment value of the contents propelled the didactic assertion.

There is no single definitive anthology to similarly validate the concept of a post-Modern Sf in the 1950s, or of its forking into the New Wave from England and the un-named anti-Wave or Wave-denial movement in the U.S. We have to turn to the Judith Merril-edited annual "Best" anthologies of the time, to Merril's *England Swings* anthology, to the headnotes for the stories in any Harlan Ellison collection from that time, and especially to Kingsley Amis's collection of connected essays, *New Maps of Hell.* The scheme of the 1950s and '60s is to be found in long-distance retrospectives such as Malzberg and Pronzini's *The End of Summer,* or as part of the content of the "Hall of Fame" anthologies edited for the Science Fiction Writers of America by Silverberg or Ben Bova, where attention to copyright dates will isolate the various sedimentary layers. It also helps to look in the *Dangerous Visions* series edited by Ellison, although here we are dealing with the "original" anthology, so that what we have is not the result of mining but the sound of the explosion.

What we notice, looking at it another way, is that it's a commercially valorous anthology, even now, that does not contain as many as possible of the names contained in *Adventures in Time and Space.* So what Bishop (and Berkley) have done is brave, not to say defiant.

This deserves note. Berkley is outright commercial, of course, and so the nature of the marketplace bet here is a multiplex one. Among questions one could ask in order to subtly convey a compliment, there are others that imply a raised eyebrow, such as: In order to justify the inclusion of names such as Ballard, *et alia* named in parentheses above, did Bishop have to modify the artistic statement he might otherwise have made even more boldly?

We cannot tell. The work of the older newcomers here is by and large on the level of the newer ones, and with well over forty pieces to fit into

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the mosaic, one has to stand pretty far back in order to see whatever picture emerges. At that distance, nitpicking becomes pointless. The total content of this book is excellent; taken as value for money, it's astonishing, taken as a reading experience it's got something and then some for every taste, taken as an anthology to be assigned as a text in a lit. course or a writing class it's an outstanding asset.

It will be interesting to see if it survives into the future that judges us, for instance, four decades hence; if there will be, in retrospect, a Golden age of Dann, Swanwick, Effinger, Scholz, Lynn, Elgin, Tiptree, Tuttle, Cowper, Utley, Waldrop, Zebrowski, and Priest? Will it be named for Bishop and the Acolytes? Will tireless essayists point out in wrath that in fact it is impossible to put all these people in the same basket, just as the dates (and the cast) of Campbell's Golden Age, of post-Moderism and of the New Wave, shift from essayist to essayist? If it survives, will it survive on merit or on Berkley's merchandising — and, more likely, if it evanesces, will shortsighted marketing policies be made to bear all the blame?

Ellison made *Dangerous Visions*; although some of the stories contained in that series were simply picked up in the market, many were driven into existence by Ellison's ferocity. On a level less intense, but perhaps more pervasive in the long run, Healy-McComas did a great deal, along with Campbell, to perpetuate "Modern" Science Fiction, whilst Amis's invention of the term "comic inferno" sufficed, I'm sure, to give credence to a fair amount of work that would otherwise never have surfaced. What has Bishop done?

Where, in short, will we find the art in all this?

Ah, well ... art is that thing we point to when we say its name. Things are not at first glance As They Are. They are as each artist says they are, and so each artist has a separate God as well as whatever God made the artist. But Kipling knew that. His poetry may be couched in an old-fashioned style; nevertheless, his head contained the entire universe, past, present and future, just as any artist's does.

A piece of work by another artist is called, in its entirety, *Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys* (because other people also wrote SF book reviews for the *Galaxy* Bookshelf department).

Frederik Pohl, I have since learned, is the fellow whose reviews in *Astonishing*, before World War II, were the model on which Damon Knight proceeded in *Worlds Beyond* magazine at mid-century, working in various media, publishing *In Search of Wonder*, and winding up, in 1960, as Book Review Editor of *F&SF*. It was Fred who hired me to become *Galaxy's* book reviewer in 1965, and it was Damon's model that I followed.

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In all, for *Galaxy* I followed it 54 times, over exactly seven calendar years. When we began putting it together — Martin Harry (the right) Greenberg and I — it turned out to be a 100,000-word slice through history, granted it's my view of history. It's as cranky, sesquipedalian and occasionally opaque as anything I've done since for *F&SF*; I was never straight, even as a comparative youth.

It covers all sorts of books, contains all sorts of philosophical spoutings, and covers the first appearances of things like *Dune, The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch, The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress, The Genocides,* and what-all. It has an index, and a list of the books reviewed — 161 of them — keyed to the running heads so you can quickly find what I thought of *Marooned in Orbit,* for instance, or *Code Three,* or *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc. — J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* Here and there, I interject a few updating comments into the main text, which is otherwise a sort of archeological reconstruction of all these now moldered issue-by-issue pronunciamentos. It also has a historical introduction by Frederik Pohl, and a scholarly one by Catherine L. McClenahan, PhD., to say nothing of yet another essay from me. Thus, it's set up to be at first glance a book of scholarly reference ... a function I expect it could, in fact, serve. It is my hope, however, that if you are entertained by what I do in this magazine each month, you will also be entertained by this book, granted that for twenty bucks I had better sing and dance pretty good indeed.

Why did I do it? Why do I do it? let me quote from my foreword:

> A book should be good. A bird should fly.
>
> Writers of imperfect, tousled books should be made aware that standards of breeding and grooming exist.
>
> Most important, readers who take reading seriously deserve a reassurance that persons within the community of authors are indeed concerned with the quality of the reading experience.
>
> It's not necessary for my standards to be universally impeccable, thank God. It's only necessary for me to growl beneath the windows of slipshod people. If they don't like my standards, let them go find others. But let them go.

Truth must be prowling out there somewhere, or why would we so often hedge ourselves 'round with so many lies?

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What do a bear and a cockroach have in common? Life isn't fair for them either...

Two Fables

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

I.

The Pretty Fair Bear

A Yellowstone Park bear, who was known as a pretty fair bear, used to hang around the campsites just to find out what was going on in the world, and to filch an occasional dainty. One night he noticed two campers looking up at the sky, and stopped to listen to their conversation.

"Wow, look at that! What a sight!" said one.

"That's the Great Bear. Impressive, isn't it?" said the other.

The bear did not think that he had been seen. But since there were no other bears in sight, and certainly none in the sky, the campers had to be referring to him. "Great Bear, eh?" he repeated to himself. He stood a little taller and walked away quite pleased.

Next day he met an old friend who was with a newcomer. The friend introduced them, and the new bear said, "I've heard a lot about you. They say you're a pretty fair bear."

"Fair, hell. They call me the Great Bear."

"We do?" said his friend, astonished.

"Damned right you do, and don't you forget it."

"No Sir," said the newcomer.

"All right, then," said the bear, and swaggered off.

After that he was known as the Great Bear among the Yellowstone Park crowd. The other bears stood up when he came into a clearing, and made way for him on the paths. Mothers told their cubs that if they ate

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regularly, got a good winter's sleep, and did as they were told, they might one day grow up to be like the Great Bear.

This did not go down so well with some of the older male bears, but there did not seem to be anything they could do about it. The Great Bear was big and strong, and had a lot of friends.

One of the old males decided to look into the matter. He hung around campsites, eavesdropping, and at last heard something helpful. He summoned all the bears in the park, including the Great Bear, to an open meeting.

"This better be important," said the Great Bear as he and two of his assistants seated themselves on a log. "I'm a busy bear, you know."

"You're a phoney!" the old bear cried. "You're not the Great Bear. The Great Bear is a constellation."

"Leave religion out of this," the Great Bear's chief assistant growled.

"A constellation is a number of fixed stars arbitrarily considered as a group. It's something floating around in the sky!" the old bear declared with a dramatic flourish.

"Oh, sure," said the Great Bear, nudging his administrative assistant in the ribs. "Bears in the sky. You see them every day."

"There goes one now!" cried the administrative assistant, and everyone began to laugh. "There goes one now!" a few others hooted, and the meeting broke up with all the bears snickering and chortling.

The old bear slunk off by himself, and spent the rest of his days in a cave, grumbling and embittered.

The Great Bear lived a long and very contented life. In his last years, he talked about being carried up into the skies and made into a constellation.

Moral: In this world, you can be anything you want to be, provided you're big and strong and have a lot of friends.

II.

The Roach Who Sought Justice

Karlheinz was a German cockroach of considerable talent and a lively intelligence. His lineage was impressive, his manners charming. All the same, he was a cockroach, and he suffered for it.

Karlheinz developed a deep commitment to social justice. He was not blind to the faults of his fellow roaches, but he resented the condemnation of all for the excesses of a few. He was also disturbed by the extreme measures taken by humans to discourage any significant roach-human interaction.

He wrote to the newspapers to protest, but his eloquent and witty letters were not published. He requested public access time on radio and television, but was refused be-

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cause of what the station managers claimed were vague credentials. Finally he decided to go to Washington and confront his congressman.

When he entered the office, the congressman's secretary recoiled. "Get out of this office!" she cried in disgust.

"I am a constituent," said Karlheinz, with dignity.

"You're a cockroach, and you're repulsive," she replied.

The congressman's aide entered the room and demanded, "What's going on here?"

"I have come seeking justice," Karlheinz said. When the secretary and the aide made noises expressing revulsion, he went on , "I am a living creature, and as such, I am sacred. William Blake wrote, 'Everything that lives is holy,' if you recall."

"Whoever William Blake was, I bet he never found a tribe of roaches camping out in his cornflakes box," said the congressman's aide.

"Sir, I cite Blake merely as an example of enlightened thought. We are speaking about the sacredness of life in the eyes of God."

"Well, God never found cockroaches in His cornflakes, either," said the secretary.

Ignoring the secretary's theologically dubious remark, Karlheinz said, "Roaches are maligned and mistreated. Every day, thousands are killed."

"Good," said the secretary.

"The government has acted to protect the snail darter and the whooping crane. There is concern for the bald eagle and the coyote and the polar bear. Why not the cockroach?"

"Those other creatures are noble, or at least attractive to the eye. The cockroach is neither, " said the aide.

"The snail darter is not very attractive, and it is certainly not noble," Karlheinz pointed out.

"It doesn't get into cereal boxes and under sinks," said the assistant. "That's good enough for me."

"Your position in this matter is illogical, unreasonable, and grossly unjust. I demand to see my congressman and present my case to him," Karlheinz said.

At that moment, the congressman stepped out of his office. Seeing Karlheinz in front of the secretary's desk, he squashed him flat. "I wish you people would try to keep this office clean," he said as he scraped the sole of his shoe on the rim of the wastebasket. "If you're not careful, the place will be crawling with cockroaches."

Moral: Everything that lives is holy, but that hasn't helped the cockroach.

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This first-rate story about the day the aliens came to the 600 block of Poplar Street is from a new author who writes that she has a B.A. from UC Berkeley in Political Science and an M.A. from UC Davis, writes a column for the local paper and teaches ballet to the world's tiniest ballerinas.

The Poplar Street Study

BY
KAREN JOY FOWLER

The 600 block of Poplar Street was known for its nice lawns. The Desmonds, who lived on the corner, had the very nicest — a tasteful display of seasonal flowers under the arch of an oriental bridge. The Narrs next door worked endlessly to keep the Desmonds' grass out of their ornamental strawberries, but this irritation had never blossomed into gunfire the way the Simpson/Martin dogfight had.

Two years ago the Martins had acquired a dog — a nervous terrier who never stopped barking. People farther down the street were able to ignore the noise. It was so steady it became no more troublesome than the occasional jet overhead, or the comforting sound of power mowers on a Sunday morning. But the Simpsons, who shared a fence with the Martins, compared it to Chinese water torture. One night Mr. Simpson hysterically demanded a solution. Mr. Martin, who really had tried to train the dog, responded nastily that the only thing he could do was to shoot it. "The blood will be on your hands," he said coldly, closing the door on Mr. Simpson's hysteria. He walked calmly into the backyard and discharged a pistol into the air. He enjoyed it, picturing the guilt Mr. Simpson must be suffering, but the terrier, who had stopped barking in surprise at the sound of the gunshot, resumed almost immediately, so the tableau was not really a convincing one.

Two months later the Simpsons moved out and the Andersons moved in. The Andersons were both black and Jewish, a nice family with two boys and a dog of their own. The barking seemed to trouble them less, although they did tell the Aldritches

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that the Simpsons had not mentioned the dog to them during the sale of the house and had described the neighborhood as "quiet." Mrs. Aldritch imagined this was a complaint, although nothing in Mrs. Anderson's tone suggested it.

At this point the trouble center of the block shifted to the Kramer house. Everyone knew that the Kramers' marriage, which had survived for twenty miserable years, was gasping its last few breaths. Mr. Kramer had told them so. "A man has certain needs," he hinted. Mr. Kramer had a drinking problem, which he displayed at every opportunity. He was overweight, balding, and flirtatious. Mrs. Kramer was a saint. Everyone said so.

The people of the 600 block knew each other without actually being friends. They were, for the most part, professionals, gone all day and tired at night. They took pride in their homes and protected their privacy.

There were only a few children: the Anderson boys, David and Joey, who were ten and eight years old; Sunny Aldritch, age eight; Tommy and Maureen Martin, eight and two; and the Evert baby, who was too little to count.

Once a year, on the fourth of July, they closed both ends of the street and had a block party with volleyball. The Kramers and the Andersons sometimes played bridge together, and groups sometimes watched the World Series or the Super Bowl at the Narrs', where reception was inexplicably better. When the Simpsons had gone for four weeks without cutting their grass, Mrs. Desmond had organized a neighborhood improvement committee to deal with them. But for the most part, the 600 block was not a social unit. Only the children were really friends, and spent the weekends riding their bicycles together, up and down the street.

The first indication of crisis that Poplar Street had was the six o'clock news, which wasn't on. Mr. Anderson turned on his television to see how the Padres were doing and got "Father Knows Best" reruns instead. On every channel. He went next door to check the Martins' TV, but the Martins were eating, and Mr. Martin said, rather shortly, that they never watched television during the dinner hour. Later Tommy Martin came to see if David and Joey could play, and interrupted the Andersons' dinner. Mr. Anderson thought it was deliberate and told his wife that Mr. Martin was a bigot with a lot of repressed hostility. He tried to call and tell him so, but the phone was dead.

At about the same time, Mrs. Narr discovered that her phone was out of order. She went to the Desmonds next door, planning to call the phone company and report it, but their phone didn't work, either. It was cocktail hour at the Desmonds' and they persuaded her to stay and join

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them. Mrs. Desmond and Mrs. Narr got along well, in spite of their warring gardens. They were both attractive, well-groomed, ambitious women in their thirties. They were both married to older, admiring men. Mrs. Desmond worked in city government, and Mrs. Narr sold real estate. Confident that someone else would eventually report the phones, they sipped martinis and complained about the Aldritches, who lived on the other side of the Narrs, but had so many cars they continually parked the oldest one in front of the Narrs' house. "There's a grease spot there that nothing will ever remove," Mrs. Narr said.

The Aldritches were a young couple with strange friends. Mrs. Aldritch must have been a child bride, and she was totally ineffectual in controlling her daughter, Sunny, whose real name was Sunshine and who knew an astounding number of vulgar expressions. The Desmonds were sympathetic to Mrs. Narr's complaints and sent her home with the comfortable feeling that she had been heard. Mrs. Desmond had even spoken of rejuvenating the Neighborhood Improvement Society, "if push came to shove," she said. Mrs. Narr went to bed happy, one of the last on Poplar Street to turn out her light.

Only Mr. Kramer remained awake, having a solitary scotch and thinking that something was different. He thought of his wife, already asleep, and had another drink, still puzzling over the change until, at last, it came to him. It was amazingly quiet out. No planes. No trains. Even the Martins' dog seemed muted. He sat out on the back patio for a long time, listening to the whisper of the natural world.

Friday morning came early to the 600 block, with so many people trying to get to so many offices, schools, and child-care centers on time. Mrs. Aldritch discovered she had no banana for Sunny's cereal. She had raisins, but Sunny didn't really like raisins, and Mrs. Aldritch thought she had time to get to the store if she took the car and made only the one purchase. She drive to the end of the block, then, suddenly, the car went dead. "Damn," she thought. It had started up smoothly enough, although she had noticed it dripping oil. Mrs. Aldritch got out with the intention of looking under the hood, but was immediately distracted by an enormous presence on the Desmonds' lawn. "My God, look at that!" she said to herself. At one end of the oriental bridge sat what appeared to be a piece of modern sculpture — huge, iridescent, with and obsidian slickness that made it appear permanently wet. "The Desmonds were the ones," she thought, "who made that huge fuss when the Kramers wanted to put those little gnomes in their yard, and now they go and put up something like this."

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The sculpture seemed to her to resemble an eight-foot mood ring. She could hardly wait to go home and tell her husband about it.

She turned, but peripherally she saw a slight tremor and looked back. Now there were two sculptured pieces, and they began to grow horizontally in a movement that became the lifting of many arms. Suddenly the bulges at the top were clearly clusters of eyes, and she could make out, she thought, lips, too, rolled back to display drooping incisors. Each creature held an object in front of it in a single hand. The objects were identical — small, metallic boxes, perfectly square — and the creatures extended the objects toward Mrs. Aldritch, making her scream and then freeze as still as her car.

The sound of her scream brought the Desmonds to their front door and Mr. Anderson to her side. Mr. Anderson's morning paper had not been delivered, and the early news had been replaced by a Dean Martin/Jerry Lewis movie. Mr. Anderson had come outside with the intention of finding out what in hell was going on, when he heard Mrs. Aldritch. He stood beside her now, his hand floating just above her shoulder, his mouth still open for the question he'd never asked. The creatures responded to his presence by waving their arms wildly and rubbing them together. The friction of their arms created a high, hollow sound, like a flute far off in the distance. Then a mechanical voice, lisping slightly and off-pitch like a record played a bit too fast, came from within the boxes. "Retain your composure if possible," it said. "No one is going to be hurt."

Down the street a door slammed, and Sunny's plaintive voice was heard. "Mommy! I thought you were making my breakfast! I'm starving to death. . . ." She appeared in front of the Aldritch house, caught sight of her mother, and began to run toward her. Mrs. Aldritch whirled, calling to Sunny to get back in the house *instantly* and to stay there. Sunny did not even pause, and her mother caught her as she came, wrapping her arms about the child protectively. From inside her mother's clutch, Sunny located the creatures. "Gross out," she said. "Really."

They heard Mr. Kramer's car pull out and head in the opposite direction. At the end of the block, it went dead and, moments later, Mr. Kramer ran toward them, white-faced and panting. Mr. Anderson caught his arm as he went past, slowing Mr. Kramer sufficiently to notice the creatures in his way. "My God," sobbed Mr. Kramer. "My God. We're surrounded."

The 600 block of Poplar Street lived inside for two whole days. Mr. Martin and Mr. Aldritch, independently, tried to climb their back fences. They found that they froze upon reaching the top, and then some irresisti-

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ble force gently pushed them back. Mr. Aldritch kept trying until he sprained his wrist. He had an over-the-fence acquaintance with his rear neighbors and tried to call to them. Mr. Anderson stood in *his* backyard and signaled repeated SOS's with bath towels and flashlights. Neither received any response. As nearly as they could tell, the blocks on every side of them were deserted.

The Narrs began to run out of food. Saturday had always been their big shopping day. Sunny, David, Joey, and Tommy began to find it tiresome indoors. They were active children, used to running and bicycling, and, being children, they found it impossible to sustain an atmosphere of alarm. The creatures had remained on the corners and made no attempt to enter the block itself. "The Best of Johnny Carson" was the only show on television.

Sunny was the first child to defy her parents and venture outdoors. She rode her bicycle enticingly back and forth in front of the Andersons' until David and Joey joined her, and soon the Martin children were out, too, pedaling around as though it were a normal weekend. They discovered a wonderful new game. If they rode as hard as they could into the Poplar/Maxwell intersection, the bicycle would freeze up suddenly, then be spit back into Poplar Street. The Anderson boys rigged a jump so that they could be aloft at the moment of freezing.

The creatures arm-wrestled at the corners and ignored them. Mrs. Desmond watched from her window. At last she made herself open the door. She walked by the creatures, catching a quick whiff of an odor rather like tuna fish, forcing herself not to move too fast. The Narrs' door opened just enough to let her in.

Mrs. Narr wanted to talk about food. The Desmonds had purchased catastrophe supplies of dried foods when Reagan became president. Mrs. Desmond chose not to mention these now, but listened to Mrs. Narr's concerns as though she shared them. "Why are they here?" said Mrs. Narr at last, and her voice went hoarse as she said it. "What do they want with us?"

Mrs. Desmond, with her greater political awareness, suggested that the Andersons might be the key. She tried to explain the quota system to Mrs. Narr, who didn't listen. The conversation about familiar issues and complaints began to soothe Mrs. Desmond. She was a professional; she was used to being in charge. Her self-confidence began to return to her. "Well, why don't we just ask them?" she said in a voice almost girlish.

But Mrs. Narr refused to join her. Not that she didn't think it was a good idea. But it struck her as rash. Mrs. Narr never behaved rashly, she reminded Mrs. Desmond. Unless she was certain the occasion called for it.

This was irritating and shook Mrs.

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Desmond's resolve slightly. But only slightly. She pointed out to herself that she had to pass right by the creatures to get home, anyway. She smiled politely and told herself Mrs. Narr was a wimp. She took a deep breath, holding herself very straight, and opened the door. It was her lawn they were camped out on, after all. She was entitled to an explanation. She attempted a confident, purposeful stride and wished she had dressed with more care. What were her clothes saying about her?

The creatures watched her approach, beginning to wave their arms. She heard a faint sound like wind chimes. The tuna odor intensified. That and their sleek skins reminded her of the seal pool at Marine World.

"I believe I speak for the entire neighborhood," she said formally, "when I say I think we have a right to know what's going on."

There was a pause, then the boxes answered. The synthetic voices reminded her of Alvin, the singing chipmunk. "Information will be provided as it is purposeful," they answered.

What did that mean? Mrs. Desmond wondered. She grew more specific; her tone was aggressive. "How long are we to be kept here?" she asked. "I have a job to go to. We're in the middle of budgeting, and I really cannot be spared. The children have school."

She waited for the response. "These things are no longer necessary," she was told.

It chilled Mrs. Desmond. She was suddenly aware of her husband, watching her through the window. His silent support brought an unprofessional quaver to her voice. She lost her courage all at once. "We cannot stay here indefinitely," she forced herself to say. "We are running out of food."

"We are prepared to assume responsibility for your nutritional needs."

The teeth that loomed above her were so clearly carnivorous. The wet skin suggested a fatty diet. Mrs. Desmond felt faint. She began to cry. "You've no right to keep us," she said. "What are you going to do with us?"

"No one will be hurt," the boxes answered. "Information will be provided as needed." The two creatures sank back into the lawn, lowered the metallic boxes. Their arms intertwined.

Mrs. Desmond went into her house and let her husband put his arms around her. "I've made you a cup of coffee," he said. "I'll go and get it."

He looked so concerned, Mrs. Desmond forced herself to smile. "Put some powdered milk in it," she told him. "We might as well get used to dried foods." She took a long time over her coffee. If she had been at work, she would probably have been drinking coffee just like this. She would have been making decisions,

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red-penciling the glut out of proposed expenditures, drafting memos. She took another sip. "Honey," she said. "We all need to talk; I mean the whole neighborhood. We need to have a meeting."

"Do you think it would be allowed?" Mr. Desmond asked.

"Let's see. Are you with me? We'll go knock on everyone's door."

"I'm with you," said her husband. "Let's go."

"No, wait." Mrs. Desmond's voice was thoughtful. "If we all put on our swimsuits, we could say we were going to the Kramers' for a swim. We could say we always do it on Sundays." Mr. Desmond told her she was very clever, and went to change into his suit and flip-flops. But at the last moment, Mrs. Desmond chose a sundress. It had occurred to her that she could easily dominate a group of people in swimsuits if she dressed appropriately. And leadership was going to be critical now. One unified response. One leader.

The creatures seemed to pay no attention to them as they stepped outside, but the creatures had a disconcerting ability to look in many directions at once, each eye independent of the others. Mr. Desmond waved his towel in their direction. "Pool party," he called and proceeded hastily to the Narrs' front door.

Sunny Aldritch came skidding up on her bicycle. "Did they invite us to go swimming?" she asked excitedly. "Really? I'll get my suit. Far out! I'll go tell my mom. She didn't think they were *ever* going ask us."

The Everts wouldn't answer their door, but the rest of the neighborhood assembled quickly at the Kramers'. A quantity of beer was produced — to help with the cover —and they began to drink it. Mrs. Desmond opened a can and looked for a place to throw the flip top. "We must be thinking about escape," she said. "After all, there are only four of them."

Sunny Aldritch took a sip of her mother's beer. "Oh, there are lots more than that," she said.

"What do you mean, sweetheart?" said Mrs. Desmond icily. "Two in front of my house, two down by the Everts'."

"But not always the same two," said Sunny. "The two at your house now are different than the first two we saw."

Mrs. Desmond felt something bitter rise in her throat. "Are you sure? How can you be sure? They all look alike."

"Not to me," said Sunny saucily.

"Even if there were only four," said Mr. Anderson, "what good would it do us? We're webbed in here. We're no match for them."

"It's a force field," said Mr. Aldritch knowledgeably. "I've seen them on 'Star Trek.' What we have to do is find out how they generate it. A picked

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team of us will have to turn it off at the source while the rest of us create a diversion."

"What if the source is outside the field?" asked Mr. Anderson.

"The key is those little boxes," said Mr. Kramer. "One of the creatures pointed a box at me, and I went weak all over. We have to get those little boxes."

The children began a game of Marco Polo in the pool. Mrs. Desmond felt the meeting was slipping away from her. "What kind of weapons do we have?" she asked.

There was a pause. "Mr. Martin has a gun," said Mr. Desmond. "We all know that. And Mr. Narr has a hunting rifle."

"Three rifles," Mr. Narr told them.

Mr. Aldritch nodded. "Keep those ready. They might be just the diversion we need." He sipped his beer. "Aliens invade suburban neighborhood," he said. "I saw it on 'Twilight Zone.' The important thing now is that we don't begin to turn on each other."

"Why?" said Mrs. Narr.

"Why what?"

"Why did aliens invade a suburban neighborhood?"

Mr. Aldritch shrugged. "For entertainment? For research?" He lowered his voice so the children wouldn't hear. "For food."

Mrs. Narr began to cry. "Suppose we could get off the block." she said. "Have you looked at the houses behind us? The grass is growing, but no one mows it. No one lives in those houses anymore."

"We haven't been mowing our lawns, but we're still here," Mr. Martin objected.

Mr. Anderson finished his beer. "But Mrs. Narr is right. Those houses are deserted. No noise, no lights. Our radios don't work. They may be holding the whole city."

"So what can we do?" asked Mrs. Desmond. "That's what we have to decide."

"Mommy!" Sunny's voice was loud and indignant. "Tommy keeps opening his eyes underwater."

"Am not," said Tommy.

"Are, too."

"You're just a baby. Can't stand to get caught."

"Can, too!"

"Can not."

"I wish we could signal," said Mrs. Aldritch quietly.

There was a pause while the neighbors thought nostalgically about the Simpsons' CB radio, which had so infuriated everyone by interfering with prime time television reception. "We have flares in the car trunk," Mrs. Desmond said at last.

"Oh, so do we," said Mrs. Aldritch. "In all the car trunks."

"We can set some out tonight," Mr. Anderson agreed.

Mr. Kramer reached for the last Coors. They were down to the light beer now. "I wonder how the Padres

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are doing," he said.

"Do you think they're playing?" said Mr. Anderson. "They were scheduled against the Braves today. And what are we getting? Did you look this morning? 'Gilligan's Island.'" His wife moved in closer to him. She thought he was beginning to get drunk. "You know Garry Templeton, the shortstop?" Mr. Anderson continued. "Did I tell you he went to the same high school I did?" There was a long silence. "Damn it! It irks me to just sit here." Mr. Anderson stood up. "I'm going to go find out what's what."

Mrs. Desmond rose, too, one hand on her husband's arm, pulling him to his feet at the same time. "We'll come," she said.

"And us," said Mr. Aldritch, "except for Sunny." Sunny climbed out of the pool instantly and came to drip on his shoes.

"Except for Sunny what?" she asked.

The other neighbors looked uncomfortably away. It was a small and silent delegation. Mr. Anderson's anger propelled them down the street. "I want some questions answered," he told the two sentries in the Desmonds' yard. They had draped themselves over the oriental bridge, which, as a result, was creaking in the center. The creatures straightened and began to rub their arms together. Mr. Anderson paid no attention to the faint music. "and I want them answered now," he said.

"Information will be provided as it is purposeful," the boxes answered. The creatures were not even holding them today, but had them slung about their bodies like tourist cameras.

"We want to contact our friends and family outside."

"Regretfully, we cannot permit it."

"I" — Mr. Anderson's voice was dangerously quiet and distinct; beer and baseball, thought Mrs. Desmond irritatedly, that's what it takes to get a man to act like a man — *"I,"* repeated Mr. Anderson, "refuse to be kept here."

The boxes made their customary pause. The sound of the creatures' arms rose in pitch. "We have no interest in interfering in your lives," they said. "Please continue to function normally."

"Normally! Normally!" Mr. Anderson's voice rose to match the boxes. "Do you imagine any part of the past few days has been normal for us? You imprison us in our homes. Cut us off from our friends. Deprive us of our sources of food and information. Even the television is nothing but reruns."

There was a longer pause. Then the boxes responded like a choir of dwarfs. "We have continued the television," they said, "because we believe it to be an integral part of your routine. We welcome programming suggestions."

Mr. Anderson sneered. "'Invasion of the Body Snatchers,'" he said.

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"'The Invaders,'" said Mrs. Aldritch.

"'War of the Worlds,'" said Mr. Aldritch.

"'Joanie Loves Chachi,'" said Sunny.

The next day the aliens delivered the first shipment of food. Four additional aliens appeared to distribute it. They greeted each other with a weaving of arms that was almost sexual, Mrs. Desmond thought, and somewhat disgusting. When the boxes were opened, they contained small, hard pellets like dog food.

"Do you believe this?" Mrs. Desmond asked. She was anxious to reestablish her authority. She felt Mr. Anderson's actions after the pool party had threatened it slightly. "Are we supposed to eat this?" she asked the alien next her. It focused three of its jellied eyes on her, but did not respond.

Mr. Aldritch picked up a pellet and tasted it. "It tastes just like it looks," he told them.

"It looks like the food you buy in the zoo for animals," said Mrs. Desmond.

"It looks like shit," said Sunny. "Rat shit. I'm not eating it."

The voice boxes spoke. "The foodstuffs are of a high quality. They are noncarcinogenic and contain slight doses of fluoride in addition to vitamins. . . ."

"We need a variety of foods," said Mrs. Narr despairingly.

"No, these will meet your nutritional needs."

"We like a variety of foods."

Mr. Evert had joined them today. He looked wan and unsteady. "The baby can't chew these," he pointed out.

"The food has been sorted according to residence. In the box labled with the number of your residence, you will find a powdered variant that may be mixed with water." Mrs. Desmond began to pass out the packages. The aliens retreated back down the street to their usual corners. "Starting tomorrow," the voice boxes chorused, "we will expect you to take weekly physicals."

Mr. Kramer's mouth went dry. "Physicals?" he said.

"We are taking care of you. We have assumed responsibility for you." The voices grew fainter. "Check your televisions. There is a film festival on."

Mr. Anderson picked up a handful of food and let it slip through his fingers. "*Rat food*," he said. "Lab rats. That's it. It's a study."

Eight additional aliens appeared in the morning for the physicals. Each could wield several instruments at once, so things went very fast. Despite Mr. Kramer's premonitions, the physicals were just physicals. Tissue samples, blood, urine, mucus, and stool samples were collected from

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each neighbor. Each neighbor was weighed and measured, their voice pitches were recorded, their posture was analyzed. There were balance tests, reflex tests, and questionnaires. "'I have the feeling people are out to get me,'" Mr. Anderson read aloud off his personality profile. "'Usually true, sometimes true, rarely true.' Jesus Christ!"

At the end of the week, the aliens made another announcement. The rubbing of their arms was particularly harmonious. They had brought five boxes of Whitman's candies as a special treat.

"Great," said Mr. Narr. "When do we get them?"

The synthetic voices were annoyingly even. "They've been hidden. You must hunt for them."

There was a long, dumbfounded silence. "You must be kidding," said Mr. Anderson. He felt a clutch inside him, a furious contraction. "We've cooperated with your physicals; we've answered your questionnaires. But we're not going to hunt for chocolates."

"I will," said Sunny. "And I bet I find them."

The children fanned out, leaving behind an angry and bewildered group of adults. "This is to humiliate us," said Mrs. Desmond. "This is a psychological ploy to break us completely. Mr. Martin, get your gun. Enough is enough."

Mr. Martin reached slowly into his shirt. "It won't work," he said. "I've already tried it."

He handed the pistol to Mrs. Desmond, who aimed in the direction of her front yard. The creatures gave no sign of noticing. "Not like this," said Mr. Anderson. "We need a plan, we need the boxes. . . ." His voice faded as Mrs. Desmond pulled the trigger and heard dead air.

"Are you sure . . .?" she began.

"Oh, it's loaded," said Mr. Martin.

"Let me try." Mr. Kramer reached for the gun. His hand shook violently and left a sweaty film on Mrs. Desmond's own dry skin. Mr. Kramer had been looking quite ill recently. His flirtatious, easy manner had vanished with the last of the alcohol. Now, in one sharp movement, he pointed the gun to his forehead and pulled the trigger. The silence continued. "Damn," said Mr. Kramer, beginning to cry. "Damn."

Sunny came racing back down the street. "I found one box in the Andersons' ivy," she called. "And another under our car. I get all the chocolate creams."

David Anderson appeared with a Whitman sampler. "Here, Mom," he said.

Mrs. Anderson opened the box. "There's a rum chocolate," she said. "You take it, Mr. Kramer." She passed the rest around.

Mrs. Narr took a caramel. "David is a good boy," she said quietly to

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Mrs. Aldritch, who nodded, chewing thoughtfully.

"A nice kid," Mrs. Aldritch said. "But just a little repressed. You'll never see Sunny stifled like that."

"No," Mrs. Narr agreed. "I know I won't."

After that the creatures began to hide the daily food supplies and to time the hunts. One day the neighbors couldn't find the food at all. They appealed to the creatures for help, but were told to look harder. A week later they came across the missing boxes in the Aldritches' garage.

"I'm surprised we *ever* found them," said Mr. Martin nastily. "It's lucky you've got the whole street to park along. It's lucky you don't have to try to fit a car in here."

Mrs. Desmond took charge of the extra food — their insurance against another failed search. She felt she was the most trustworthy since she and her husband still had their dried foods, but she did not explain this to the neighbors. The fact that the Desmonds were still drinking coffee was something they kept just between the two of them.

In the third week Mr. Anderson was asked to remain at the physicals for additional testing. A single alien did the extra workup; it was the first time Mr. Anderson had seen one alone. He had begun to notice differences in the individual creatures — enough to know that Sunny was right. There were a great many of them. They even smelled different at times. The one drawing blood samples from him now had the customary tuna odor with a sort of garlic overlay. Mr. Anderson supposed that *their* diets varied. He tried to count up exactly how many there were, but couldn't. He thought of the hopeless flares they had lit, night after night, when there were no humans in the air to see them. He felt completely dispirited.

The voice box spoke in its high-pitched, expressionless way. "You seem to have an abnormality in your ability to use sugar."

"You're talking about diabetes," said Mr. Anderson. "No, I'm not diabetic."

"Our tests confirm that you are."

"I would have thought we were on a pretty low-sugar diet. But, if you're right, I'll need insulin."

"There are a number of possible treatments. Each one necessitates greater contact between you and us than we can allow. Such intercourse may contaminate the control group. It will be necessary to remove you."

Mr. Anderson felt cold. "The control group?" he asked, his own voice high and false somehow. "We're the control group?" There was no answer. "Don't take me," he said. "Please."

"It is regrettable. You were one of the brighter subjects. We have always enjoyed your questionnaires. And you have assumed some leadership. Some-

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one else must replace you. That, in itself, will be interesting to see. Mrs. Aldritch, perhaps? Or Mr. Kramer?"

This was more than any of the creatures had ever said to Mr. Anderson. In the sheer volume of information he was receiving, Mr. Anderson saw the hopelessness of his position. He was not going back. Not even to say good-bye. There was no reason not to be frank with him. "My family is there," he pleaded. "My children."

"The children are proving adaptable to anything. The important element is the integrity of the control. None of the other experiments can be evaluated without it."

Mr. Anderson maneuvered himself closer to the alien. Its arms were nearly around him, the smell was very intense. Almost, he was out of the creature's line of vision, almost too close to be seen. The eyes loomed above him like clusters of fish eggs. He grabbed for the voice box, held onto it though it burned his hand. It became shapeless, melted in his palm, and his last hopes melted with it. The creature ignored this action, merely grasped him gently by the shoulders and lower down the arms, thrusting him out farther away. The mountain of eyes focused on him.

"You're all wrong," said Mr. Anderson, "if you imagine that you've created a control situation in there. It's laughable, really."' He felt his cheeks go wet, his nose fill. He wiped it. "I mean if you think for a moment what's going on out there is normal." The creature created a gentle friction with its arms, like wind in the trees. What it meant Mr. Anderson didn't know, but he thought, he imagined, that the fishy eyes were looking at him intently, and that the movement of the arms was thoughtful.

Five years passed before they saw him on Poplar Street again. The creatures had been mistaken in their predictions. Neither Mrs. Aldritch nor Mr. Kramer nor Mrs. Desmond, despite her hopes and plans, had emerged as the natural block leader. It was Sunny who mediated between the neighbors and the creatures, organized the food hunts, and planned holidays for their entertainment. She discovered quite quickly that there were patterns to the ways in which the food was hidden, and although the patterns changed, twenty minutes was the longest she ever had to hunt. She used this expertise to bully the reluctant grown-ups into doing what she wished. Gradually the resentment disappeared, and it began to seem natural to listen to Sunny and agree with Sunny and do what Sunny said. When the Martins' dog died in a hysterical fit and Sunny wanted the entire neighborhood to attend a burial in the Martins' backyard, everyone did so.

Mrs. Narr let her garden go to weed and learned to make dandelion salads, which were enjoyed with the

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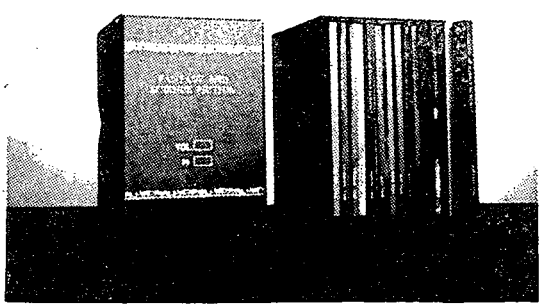
same ardor as the occasional Whitman's candies. Mr. Kramer began an evening tradition of storytelling in which his stories were acknowledged the best. They were, Mrs. Aldritch told him wistfully, as good as the soaps.

He was continuing an old favorite, a tale about warriors as slender as reeds who lived in glass houses on green hills at the end of the world, on the evening when Mr. Anderson reappeared. When they first saw him, in the last light of the day, he was magnificent. His skin gleamed moistly, he waved his arms when he talked, and his words were a kind of singing. He had been living with aliens, he told them. But now he was back. They thought he was some sort of messiah come to lead them to freedom. He even thought so himself. Unless it was another experiment. There was really no way to be sure.



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John Brunner has written several stories about the odd adventures of Mr. Secrett, but none stranger than this account of a wild Hollywood party and a guest who arrives in a coat of some amazing and indescribable fur...

The Man Who Made the Fur Fly

BY
JOHN BRUNNER

Not long before he died, my uncle Cyril bought my aunt Mildred a Mink Jacket, and it cost Four Hundred Guineas. I put it like that because she always refers to his present in a tone redolent of capital letters.

The only chance she had of wearing it was at his funeral, for on being widowed she decided to make a hobby out of hypochondria. She took to her bed, and now occupies her time by pestering her relatives.

All of which goes to explain why, every spring, I have to waste a morning at one of those eerie warehouses where they keep fur coats in cold store. She always writes demanding that I personally inspect the garment before handing over her check to cover the coming year's storage plus the insurance premium, which always increases because the price of mink keeps going up.

I do as I'm told, for the worst of reasons. If I don't, she'll cut me out of her will, and as a writer who is still struggling after being in his trade even longer than her precious jacket has been in the care of Messrs. Howland & Timms, I'm tolerably certain that only a legacy will grant me the degree of independence I've always craved. Not that I would ever admit the fact....

Except I did. And to the last person I'd have chosen to confide in.

Having attended to my annual chore and noted that the coat's insured value had topped three thousand pounds — and reflecting somberly on the uses I could have put that much money to — I heard a horribly cheerful greeting.

"Why, scrivener! Long time no see, as contemporary argot has it!"

Who among my acquaintances still

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imagines that to be a trendy phrase? It could only be Mr. Secrett....

I mustered a sickly grin as he bore down on me with hand outstretched. Beaming, he went on, "And what brings you here? Don't tell me — let me guess! Your well-merited good fortune permits you to bestow a gift on the object of your affections, and unclaimed furs from this store offer remarkable value, do they not?"

"What good fortune?" I snapped back.

With an air of contrition, he said, "Sorry, old man! But in common with everybody else, I read in the papers that Laszlo Perkins and your producer friend Mr. Casparole have raised umpty million dollars for a TV series based on the former's books, and since you've allowed me to form the impression that most of them were ghostwritten by your good self.... Did I jump to a wrong conclusion?"

It was a forgivable error. I have been responsible — may Heaven forgive me! — if not for writing most of Laszlo P.'s pseudoscientific best sellers, then for researching them, and Mr. Agent had filled my mind with dreams about being flown out to Hollywood to draft the scripts; indeed, I'd sunk three months' work in versions done on spec.

However, Laszlo has always been much too clever to share his loot, and I'd wound up without a penny for my trouble. So, irritably, I told Mr. Secrett about my real errand — regretting the words almost before they escaped my lips. But I was feeling extremely sorry for myself that morning.

Sensing my embarrassment, he clapped me on the shoulder. "No need to blush for my sake, old fellow! Remember, I'm of a generation that took for granted the notion of 'having expectations'! Besides, a trip to Hollywood would have disappointed you terribly. It's nothing like what they crack it up to be, or at any rate it wasn't in my own experience. Now why don't we — ah — 'go for a jar,' my treat? The pubs must be open by now, and I can spare an hour before I return to the library."

"Very well," I sighed, and followed him.

Enstooled at a smart new bar, I expatiated on the iniquities of Perkins and Casparole for a while, and felt the better for it. Then I realized with dismay that Mr. Secrett had the indefinable air of someone waiting to say something on his own behalf. I ordered a second round of drinks and forced myself to sound affable.

"And what brought you to Howland & Timms?" I invited.

"I'm glad you asked me that, old chap. Very glad indeed. For a good few years, I've endured a duty not dissimilar from your own, albeit self-imposed, and I've been wondering to whom I might bequeath it. I'm getting on, you know, and none of us lasts forever."

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Sourly I said, "I have enough duties already, bequeathed or otherwise — thanks very much!"

"Well, it was just an idea.... Cheers!"

But as Mr. Secrett raised his newly filled glass, I detected in his face something I'd never seen before: a look between sorrow and anxiety, which stated plainer than words that he was dreadfully worried. Ever since our first meeting, I'd regarded him as a person of the type they call "fireproof" — one who had had such practice at disguising his true emotions, it was only with extreme difficulty that he admitted their existence. For example, despite his countless declarations of affection for me, he had never bothered to ring me up and suggest coming to call.

Maybe, though, that was because I'd treated him exactly the same way....

I suddenly imagined myself as I might well be when I reached his age: a solitary bachelor disappointed of his ambitions. Would I be able to keep up so bold a front?

"Let's move somewhere more comfortable," I said, sliding off my barstool and making for a bench. "At least I ought to hear you out before I turn you down."

"I knew I could count on you!" he exclaimed. My heart quailed, but I steeled myself to pay attention.

It's odd you should have mentioned Hollywood (began Mr. Secrett), because that's where my problem was wished on me, and by nobody so trivial as a querulous relative....

I imagine you're too young for the name of Lorna Ridge to mean anything to you, let alone Cecile Deraine or Jan van Groot — Wait, wait! I keep forgetting how old films are kept alive by television, since as it happens I don't own a set. So I needn't explain that during and just after the war, Lorna Ridge and Cecile Deraine were among the cinema's most — as they say nowadays — "bankable" female stars, and the keenest of rivals, while the man who called himself Jan van Groot, a German émigré who for obvious reasons had changed his name to its Dutch form in 1942, was one of its most successful directors.

But one would have to consult a specialized and possibly scandal-mongering history of the industry to learn that van Groot had a regrettable habit of employing only those leading ladies who were prepared to — well, we're men of the world, so I'll be blunt — prepared to share his bed for the duration of a particular production. Afterward, if they had especially pleased him, they stood a chance of being used again — in all senses of the word — but not even the contract system that then obtained, not even the studio bosses themselves, could oblige him to rehire the lady in question. His every picture was a "surefire hit," and he dictated terms from, as the cant phrase has it, a position of strength.

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Certainly I had no idea of his *mœures* when I turned up at a party of his. To me he was —

Ah, I should explain how I happened to be there, in case you think me guilty of name-dropping. I confess I wasn't on the guest list!

All this happened during my *Wanderjahre,* long before I settled down in my present post. Even though one's foreign currency allowance was limited to some ridiculous sum like twenty-five pounds, it was possible, if one had the right contacts, to make quite extensive tours abroad, and I'd had the good luck to fall in with an American who gave me many useful introductions. I'd worked my way across the United States on what one might call an "old-boy network." When I reached California, though, I don't mind admitting I was at the end of my resources.

Then, however, I followed up yet another of the contacts my American friend had given me, and chanced across a fellow Englishman who specialized in providing temporary domestic help for the wealthy householders of the area. He himself was a trained butler, who had worked for many members of the nobility but had been obliged to emigrate because — Well, the poor chap is dead now, so we won't go into that.

At all events, he declared that I came as a gift from the gods. He had a booking for this lavish party at van Groot's place, and he was desperately in need of an extra footman. Mr. van Groot did keep resident staff, a Hawaiian couple, but the guest list was to exceed a hundred, and of course two people couldn't cope unaided. The pay would be excellent; would I take on the job?

At the time I would have been glad to dig holes in the road for a living wage. However, for honesty's sake I had to explain that I'd never done anything remotely comparable. But he waved my protestations aside; I'd need only to take coats and hats from the guests at the door, pass their invitations to him so they could be correctly announced, and circulate during the proceedings with trayloads of drinks and snacks. Besides, he maintained, the fact that I was genuinely English, instead of one of his usual phony recruits attempting to talk like a cross between Charles Laughton and someone out of Dickens, would carry me through the evening splendidly.

So I consented, and turned up at the appointed time, and struggled into an approximately fitting waiter's suit. I felt, I must admit, a little like a penguin....

At first everything went as smoothly as the limousines rolling up to the house. It was in fact more of a mansion, with immense gardens and a vast swimming pool — the epitome of a Hollywood home right down to the decorations, which had been confided to a studio set designer and

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were in the most atrocious taste. I ignored my surroundings as best I could, of course; it didn't strike me as a footman's place to pass judgment.

In those days, though, I was a susceptible young fellow, and the sight of people whom I'd previously seen only via the mediation of the silver screen did keep distracting me. At one point my butler friend had to reprimand me for gauping like a schoolboy, and he was entirely justified.

After a couple of hours, there was a lull, and I was able to chat with some of my temporary colleagues. I was so little acquainted with the movie world that I had never heard the name of Rubella Carpson, who could make and break Hollywood reputations with a single acid sentence, but the rest of the staff were avid followers of her gossip column, and opened my eyes to the complex relationships obtaining between the guests. They spoke of so-and-so's impending marriage, impending divorce, suit for paternity, libel actions, dispute with the studio bosses over an unjust contract.... Each time I set off with another load of drinks, I looked with renewed interest at the people I was serving. Instead of images — mere shadows — these people were becoming three-dimensional at last.

Above all, of course, the gossip centred on the host, Jan van Groot. I'd been out of touch during my travels, and it was news to me that he'd been hired to direct what his employers, Mega-Gorgon-Midas, were already trumpeting as the most colossal epic since *Gone with the Wind*. I was equally ignorant of the fact that, striving to echo the impact of the hunt for a girl to play Scarlett O'Hara, van Groot had launched a nationwide search for a female star ... of which my new friends were contemptuous. It was, they insisted, a foregone conclusion that the role would go to whoever was the director's mistress on the day appointed for shooting to begin. At present the front-runner was Lorna Ridge, who had already been here when we arrived, had issued orders to us as though she were the hostess, and was constantly in van Groot's company, clinging to his arm and laughing inordinately at his bad jokes. Or, conceivably, his bad English, though I doubted whether that was wise.

And a fine-looking woman she was, I must admit, although in person she did not quite match up to the flawless image she projected to the camera. She would then, I suppose, have been in her mid-thirties, and while her hair was as sleek and glossy and her eyes as large and limpid as I had expected, she was developing a double chin and crows'-feet, and it was all too obvious under her slinky satin gown that her increasing girth was calling for the most skilled assistance from her corsetiere.

Nonetheless, she had a deep and vibrant voice, which lent her a cer-

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tain presence — or "charisma," as they say nowadays, which is a dreadful debasement of a key theological concept ... but I digress.

The party developed in what I gathered was the usual manner, to the accompaniment of the latest swing records on an alarmingly loud phonograph. Everybody greeted everybody with extravagant professions of amity, and then proceeded to slander one another equally vigorously as soon as they were in different company — while drink flowed in copious quantities, food was largely neglected, and, after a time, not only cigarettes but — ah — "reefers" were freely offered and exchanged.

The upshot was that by midnight most of the guests were lounging around in twos or threes, in the main living area, or on the patio that it overlooked, or in the various other rooms, of which there must have been at least a score. There was an electric bell system, connected to a display board in the kitchen that had thirty telltales on it, and underneath was a diagrammatic map to save us from getting lost on the way. I was on call constantly; nonetheless, I'm sure I didn't visit every room.

Around midnight, as I was saying, there was a distinct lull, and most of the bells stopped ringing, and my butler friend suggested it was time to rest our feet. He led me to a quiet corner, and the Hawaiian housekeeper brought us sandwiches and a shot of Mr. van Groot's gin, a recognized perquisite on such occasions.

"Things have gone better than I expected," he informed me. "In fact, they've turned out swimmingly!"

Attempting a joke, I suggested it might be too cool for swimming. Did I mention this took place in early spring?

"You'd be surprised," he answered darkly. "I've catered parties like this before, and if later on the studio magnates decide they'd like to see what the girls look like when they're wet to the skin, they may very well call on us to help throw them into the pool. If that happens, don't raise too much sand."

I must have looked at him blankly, because he felt obliged to amplify. He meant, he said, that we should not offer too many objections, since the girls wouldn't. The sight of a shapely body in a gown soaked to transparency had more than once sufficed to ensure that the young lady in question secured a comfortable ride, if not exactly back home, then to a cozy bed for tonight and succeeding nights.

I was enjoying a liberal education. Things had never been like this in .... Ah, but there are few more boring subjects than one's childhood!

Besides, I frankly did not believe some of what my friend was saying. The immense living area was quiet; even the music had softened, for the

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phonograph was now being loaded with stacks of "sweet swing." Lorna Ridge was ensconced on a cushion at van Groot's feet as he chatted with the "movie moguls" who surrounded him. Walking in off the street, one would have had the clear impression that the atmosphere was calm and relaxed, and would remain so.

According to my friend, however, one needed to be aware of the fires smoldering beneath the surface. The men who held the studio purse strings, talking so amiably with their star director, were actually furious with him for refusing to nominate Miss Ridge as the leading actress in the major production I referred to earlier. Because of his intransigence, they were having to hold back on the publicity campaign they were planning, and they felt that his quest for a new talent was certain to backfire.

But Mr. van Groot — said my informant — was less interested in discovering a brilliant newcomer than in finding a fresh partner to accommodate what were allegedly his somewhat peculiar tastes....

"At least, though," concluded — let's call him 'Mr. Butler,' shall we, and spare his memory? "At least we got off lightly compared with what I expected. Cecile Deraine starred in his last big feature, you know, and the damned fool put her on the invitation list for tonight. He's like that; he gets a charge out of having his former girlfriends around at the same time as his current flame. And I even imagined she might turn up, because it's no secret that she'd give an arm and a leg for the part of — "

At which moment the music ended and the doorbell rang.

"Move!" snapped Mr. Butler.

I raced to the door, but was too late. Some tipsy nobody happened by, and had already opened the door.

"Cecile darling!" he exclaimed at the top of his voice, and van Groot and his paramour leaped to their feet.

The nobody attempted to embrace the new arrival, but she swept past him, and me as well, and headed directly for van Groot, declaring in a loud but thin soprano voice that she was infinitely desolated by her late appearance, only she had had problems and troubles such as would cause one to figure furiously concerning the ill will of the Creator were one to be as religious as herself, and so on. I had previously wondered, in the warm darkness of my local flea pit, whether Mlle Cecile Deraine could truly be as French as Claudette Colbert — which was the image projected on her behalf — for she was more of a Scandinavian type, thin and bony and extremely blonde, but.... Well, in those days the actors and actresses were ruled by the studio publicity departments, you know.

On my travels, though, I had heard reports that indicated that it was improbable she had greatly enjoyed her obligatory service in the bed of Herr von Grosch — I mean, van Groot.

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The circles I was then frequenting, however, were rife with ill-founded rumors, so that's as may be; but here she was, as large as life, falling upon his neck even before I'd had the chance to take her coat from her. Indeed, she might have refused to part with it, because....

Well! Earlier in the evening, other women had arrived wearing fox, sable, ermine, seal, musquash — goodness knows what else, for I'm no expert — yet none of their expensive finery had been a match for hers. That fur glistened like oil on water: at first glance one might have called it reddish, or tawny; but a second look, with light falling at a different angle, would have convinced one it was blue-black; and then a moment later; it was almost white, it caught and returned the light so flawlessly. And then again.... Oh, it's far beyond my powers of description. Suffice it to say that throughout the vast living area all eyes were magnetized by it, and — fully aware of the impact she was making — Mlle Deraine, not letting go of van Groot's arm, turned through a half circle to make the fur flare out around her and bestowed a dazzling smile on the company. No question of it: she was younger and slimmer and, in every respect bar her voice, more attractive than her rival, with piercing blue eyes and an immaculate complexion and a vast aureole of natural blonde hair, done in what was at the time a most unfashionable style, yet so flattering that one dared not criticize.

For a long moment she held her pose, and with it said more clearly than in words, "Is not this man a fool to turn me down for someone older, fatter, and less beautiful?"

I — even I! — had been half-mesmerized by her what they then called glamour: I, who had long thought myself immune.... But with an effort I tore my gaze away and looked at Lorna Ridge.

Written in her expression was a whole volume of conflicting emotions. A look of feral hatred gave way to one of anxiety; then a flash of visible calculation; finally a broad smile, artificial but reinforced by her not inconsiderable acting powers, as she decided that she dare not behave churlishly, for fear of enraging van Groot.

Advancing on Cecile Deraine, she gave her a brief embrace. "How wonderful that you could be here!" she exclaimed. "And isn't that a magnificent coat? Would you like me to take it?"

There was an unexpected pause. During it, a beam of equally unexpected satisfaction dawned on Cecile's face.

"You like it?" she purred. "Then take it by all means."

Confused, Lorna drew back half a step. "I didn't mean — " she began.

"But I did," came Cecile's prompt retort, and she slipped out of the coat and handed it over. What she was

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wearing underneath I can't recall; one's gaze was so fixed on that amazing fur.

Unable to think of an alternative, Lorna accepted it and marched away, fuming, in search of someone to put it with the rest of the visitors' belongings: me, as it happened.

I draped it over my arm and headed for the vestibule that was serving as a cloakroom. But I glanced back just before I left the living area, and there was no sign of either Cecile or van Groot. Conversation had begun again, and there was just one subject: Cecile's arrival. In the middle of the floor, Lorna stood like a statue, except that she was trembling and clenching her fists. When people called out, inviting her to come and join them, she spun on her heel and fled.

It was a long time before I saw her again, although one of the other footmen told me he had answered a bell at the far end of the house and been ordered to bring her a big glass, some ice, and a full bottle of gin, no mixers. Meantime the party continued as though she didn't exist.

Mr. Butler's contract obliged him and his staff to serve until three in the morning and then clear away against our departure, which was scheduled for four. At the first signs of weariness — which overtook us about one o'clock, I suppose — he issued something I had never before sampled: amphetamine pills such as were given to servicemen during the war. Combined with coffee and alcohol, the drug had a greater impact on my customarily abstemious self than on the rest. Suddenly I felt wide-awake, with my mind in high gear, and all my senses became abnormally keen. The overall result was not, I confess, entirely disagreeable, though I've never been tempted to repeat the experiment, but I did feel very odd, and I kept finding that my attention was wandering as I circulated with more trayfuls of liquor. I might add that certain of the guests were already asleep, and one handsome romantic star with an international reputation as a lady-killer proved to snore quite abominably when under the — ah — influence....

At some stage it occurred to me to remark to Mr. Butler that I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Cecile and van Groot since I took away the fur coat. He gave a shrug and stated that the lady's car had departed long ago, its back seat fully occupied.

"You mean," I countered in astonishment, "that the host has left his own party?"

Dismissively, he indicated that so long as van Groot paid the bill, it was no skin off his nose. He added, furthermore, that the question of who was to play the lead in the forthcoming cinematic epic had been settled: Cecile.

"But," I exclaimed, "she didn't

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reclaim her fabulous coat!"

He fixed me with a sour grin. "To her," he said, "not all the fur coats in the world could possibly be worth as much as another starring role in a van Groot picture."

And then he consulted his watch and decided it was near enough to closing time to set about cleaning up. We might as well, he told us, slip away, since, in the absence of van Groot, there was no one who could order us to stay.

The guests mostly took the hint and started to disperse. The few who were too far gone in drink to rouse themselves could be looked after when they woke up in the morning by the resident Hawaiians, who were both overjoyed to learn that they were not going to be obliged to stay up all night and then serve brunch to dozens of survivors. In fact, they made for bed as soon as Mr. Butler told them they could leave the rest to us.

There was, however, rather more of the rest to deal with than I think he'd bargained for. I blush to admit it, but I contrived to concentrate on the lightest part of the work, collecting dirty glasses and returning guests their coats, rather than setting to over a sinkful of suds.

And then, as the number of coats diminished, a sudden horrifying realization dawned on me. There was no longer any sign of Cecile Deraine's magnificent fur.

I made haste to report the fact to Mr. Butler, but he showed no interest. Laughing harshly, he said that his concern with the affair was over, and everybody would be leaving in five minutes, and one of the other footmen — I wasn't certain which, but he pointed vaguely in the direction of some chap drying his hands after emptying the sink — would give me a lift to near where I was lodging, and I should come to Mr. Butler's office tomorrow to be paid, and maybe there'd be another job in a week or two, because I'd done pretty well for a first-timer. I quote him not from vanity, you understand, but for the sake of accuracy.

All this was spoken through a series of yawns, and the others, too, were on the verge of collapse. I myself, however, was amazingly alert; it must have been the — what did they nickname the stuff! — ah, yes: the "speed."

And then one of the bells rang imperiously, and a telltale waggled madly on the kitchen display board.

"Oh, hell!" moaned one of my colleagues. "Lorna must be out of booze *again*!"

"I thought she'd gone!" said Mr. Butler. "Didn't I see her cross the living area just now?"

"Yes, and I thought we were finally shut of her! But — well, did anybody call her driver?"

"She told me to send him away," chimed in someone else. "Said to come back in the morning. I guess she's planning to lie in wait for the boss ...

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only she'll be too loop-legged to get up if he does come home!"

The bell rang again, longer and louder, but none of the others seemed inclined to move. So I said, "O.K., I'll go."

I loaded up what I gathered was her usual tray: ice, a big glass, and as nearly full a bottle of gin as had survived, and set off on a voyage of exploration that took me into a section of the house I hadn't previously entered, a wing whose windows directly overlooked the swimming pool.

By now it was completely unoccupied, apart from one room at the far end of the corridor. Its door was ajar, and through it a dull light gleamed. I headed for it. And within, lying on a wide, soft bed, her eyes red-rimmed from weeping, I found Lorna Ridge, huddling under Cecile's coat.

"You rang, ma'am?" I murmured in the fatuous style Mr. Butler had encouraged me to adopt.

She raised on one elbow, and I saw she was unbelievably drunk. Her eyes were practically awash. Moreover, she had undressed; not only her gown but its complex elastic substructure lay in a heap in the corner, as though she had dropped the lot and dismissed it with an angry kick.

What she said, though, took me utterly by surprise.

"Thank God somebody turned up! Help me — help me, please! I think I must be going mad!"

For long seconds I must have stood there like a ninny.

"Put down that damned tray!" she ordered. "I don't want any more liquor — I've had too much already, I know that! Just come here and ... oh, God! Just hold my hand, or something! *I really think I must be going mad!*"

She held out both arms beseechingly.

"Ma'am, I think it would be better if I — "

"All right, leave me!" she shouted. "Like he left me! Leave me to my nightmares and my lonely terror!"

In retrospect I decided that that line must have come from one of the pictures she'd appeared in. But she delivered it with such fervor that for a moment I was convinced van Groot had made a serious mistake by going off with her rival. Nowadays, as perhaps you know, students of cinema claim that at her best, Lorna Ridge could rival Bette Davis. Here, drunk or not, she was turning her full intensity on yours truly, youthful and naïve as I then was.

In the distance I vaguely heard — for the music had stopped by now — the noise of cars starting up, presumably to take the rest of the temporary staff away. But in my light-headed condition, I felt I could walk home if I must. So I set down the tray and nervously approached the bed.

As soon as I came within arm's reach, she seized my hand and clutched it to her and dissolved into a flood of tears.

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I imagined I understood what was troubling her. Her greatest rival had walked out of his own party with the director who had seemed about to nominate her for the plum role of the cinematic year. That surely was enough to explain her condition — that, and the gin.

Except it wasn't.

As the light grew brighter behind the curtains, her sobbing and babbling gave way to comprehensible words. She wasn't talking about herself at all. She was describing....

No, let me delay the details until later. I'll content myself for the moment with saying that at first I imagined she was rehearsing from memory the script of a particularly well researched horror picture, accurately portraying a primitive ceremony that would conclude in a sacrifice with her as the victim.

And then, belatedly, it struck me that some of the details were such as could not possibly have been shown on screen under the Hays Office code.

Most definitely, however, she could not be referring to a picture made before the code's edicts took effect, for most of those pictures were silent; and quite shortly, still clinging to my hand like a shipwrecked sailor to a life belt, she began to intersperse what she was saying with a deep-throated chant, impossible to imitate on a pit-piano. It was in the purest and most rudimentary version of the pentatonic scale.

At length she had to pause for breath, and I said foolishly, "Miss Ridge, where in the *world* did you learn about such things?"

She looked at me as though for the moment she couldn't remember who I was.

"What things?" she said. "I've just been telling you about my dream."

"A dream?" I echoed.

"That's why I think I'm going mad! I — oh, I know I'm stinking drunk, only I'm not drunk enough to do what I most want: forget how that bitch Cecile walked in tonight and made off with Jan as though she'd bought him in exchange for this damned coat of hers! A while ago it seemed like a good idea to look and see if it was still there, so I went and got it and — and here it is." She plucked at one of its exquisite sleeves. "So I thought: Hell, it's only fair for me to take it if she's stolen Jan. So I came back here and lay down under it and...."

A colossal yawn got in her way. I made to rise, but she refused to release me.

"No, please — no!" she whimpered. "Don't leave me on my own! I couldn't bear it! I don't want you to do anything! I just don't want to be alone! I think even if you were Cecile, I'd still not want you to go away!"

The effects of the amphetamine had worn off. Suddenly I felt both tired and extremely cold.

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For those or maybe other reasons, I said, "All right." And I slipped off my shoes and let her draw me under the protection of the coat, and within a minute she was fast asleep.

I resisted just a little longer, but I was more exhausted than I'd thought, and very shortly I, too, drifted into dreamland.

Not that my sleep was restful — quite the reverse.

Images drawn from memory, due mainly to the party, filled my mind, and gradually were transformed into a different context. A recollection of van Groot as the Big Chief, affably greeting his visitors and entertaining them, evolved abruptly into a vision of — not him, but someone tall and only half-perceived — issuing fierce orders for the making ready of a feast. Around him cringing unclad women scurried back and forth, never daring to stand up to their full height even when they were caught by the hair and forced to do abominable things. My dream was full of images of blood: its stench as it dried on the hands of those who had butchered the countless animals that were to be devoured, the reek of raw meat being seared over a fire, the color of it repeated in the reflection of the flames....

Where did the dream take place? Oh, in a cavern, I suppose, because the smoke seemed to have no outlet, and in a little while, it blurred everything I tried to look at. Also, it made their voices hoarse when, bellies replete, the men of the company began to chant — in just the mode that Lorna Ridge had imitated.

Yet in the dream I understood that chant. I knew its meaning, and with dread awaited the climax it was building to, until there was a sudden yell, and the chief man stood forth arrayed in the hide of the tribe's most deadly enemy, whom they'd defeated. For one whole generation, there had been no sign of it save this: its flayed pelt.

In memory of that beast's final kill, they then advanced with a young woman, held by arms and legs, and brought her to the fire. Despite her screams, they turned her upside down and cut her throat, and used her blood to douse the flames.

Into the darkness spoke an awful voice, and made a promise.

It said that whosoever wore the hide should have his heart's desire fulfilled, and lead the tribe to new and better kills. It said that killing was the only goal in life. It said that without killing, bellies would be empty and limbs would be scrawny and children would inevitably die. It said there was a lesson to be learned, and it was taught by the former owner of the skin the chief had on. It said the women's ways of seeking roots and nuts and berries were unworthy of a man, who must shed blood to make new life. That was a right and proper kill that doused the fire, for men must control the making of new fire

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as bright as blood, not leaving such a sacred matter to the women.

And, speaking of women — here the voice took on a loathsome joviality — should the men not make haste to start another fire and roast the sacrifice?

A flame sprang up, and there were cheers, and the noise of something being hacked to bits....

That was as much as I could stand. I woke up moaning, and reached out as Lorna Ridge had done, to seek comfort in another's presence.

I was alone. It was dawn. My head ached terribly, and all my limbs were limp as rubber.

Somehow I forced myself to my feet, casting aside the fabulous fur coat, and realized that the window overlooking the swimming pool stood wide open. Still less than half awake, I staggered to it and peered out. Do I have to tell you what I saw?

The naked body of Miss Ridge, afloat facedown at the deep end....

She had been well and duly sacrificed.

Well, I don't need to spell out the rest. I took a few obvious precautions, such as emptying the gin bottle into the adjacent toilet — where, luckily, she'd already vomited without flushing the bowl — and made haste to my lodgings, taking the coat with me. By the time the hue and cry was raised, I was safe in bed. No one was awake to hear me come home, which I was banking on.

Naturally, because the postmortem examination showed that she must have been intoxicated almost to a fatal level, and of course it would never have done for any other verdict to be returned, the inquiry into her death was brief and superficial and returned a verdict of death by misadventure. I wasn't even called to give evidence. I only had to answer questions from a bored detective, who was quite satisfied with my assertion that I'd delivered the final consignment of gin and returned to the kitchen, only to find that there had been a mix-up over who was to give me a ride home, so the others had left without me, and I'd been obliged to walk.

Mr. Butler kindly corroborated that, though, owing to what one might call the circumstantial evidence, he was very chilly toward me thereafter, and I never did get the further work he'd spoken of.

So I was obliged to make my way back to England, which I did by devious means, and upon my return, I risked snipping a tiny sample of the fur from where it wouldn't show and took it to a friend of mine at London University. Modern science is wonderful, isn't it? From the scrap I gave him, he was able to carbon-date the thing, plus or minus a few millennia, and he assured me it was one and a half million years old. So you'll understand why I'm so anxious to make

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sure it's well looked after.

Oh, I know what you're going to say, you incurable sobersides! You're going to say, Why isn't it in a museum somewhere, for the world to gaup at? But at the risk of indulging in a cliché, scrivener, I do feel there are some phenomena we are not yet equipped to understand, and so long as there are people around like Cecile Deraine, prepared to do what in earlier times would have been called "sell their souls" for the sake of worldly glorification, then it seems to me the fur is safer in a cold store. Don't you agree?

I came back to reality with a dull thud, thinking mainly of the fact that more than the promised hour had elapsed and Mr. Secrett was as long overdue at his library as I to return to my typewriter.

But all I could find to say, feebly, was: "No, that wasn't what I was going to ask about."

"What, then?"

"How in heaven's name did you get the fur back to Britain, if it was as spectacular as you make out? Didn't they challenge you at customs?"

"Oh, you authors! Always more interested in the mere mechanics of a story than its underlying import!"

For a moment I was sure I'd caught him out in a fiction — believed he'd made up the entire story and overlooked that crucial point. Then he gave a disarming chuckle.

"Well, I don't suppose it's escaped your notice that before the hippies there were the beatniks?"

"What does that have to do with it?"

"A great deal, actually. Because beatniks weren't such pioneers as they imagined, either. A full decade earlier, there were others like the sort of person I imitated. I don't know whether they gave themselves a name; I suspect not, being too fiercely individualistic. But I contrived to turn myself into one of them during the month it took me to return to New York." He gave an embarrassed laugh. "I forgot about visiting barbers, and threw away my razor in order to grow as much of a beard as I'm capable of. I'm glad I don't have a picture of myself in that guise! Also, I neglected to wash more than was absolutely unavoidable; and when I left America, they were glad to see the back of me; and when I got home, they were annoyed at having to let me in, but my passport was in order, so...."

"The coat!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, I was wearing it."

"What?"

"I turned it inside out. At some stage in its existence, it had been lined with silk. I assumed that was of little consequence, so I slashed it here and there, taking care not to injure the actual skin, and I arrived home quite literally in rags. Naturally, as soon as I got back to my dig-

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gings, I was glad of a bath and a shave, but the device served its purpose. And then, as I said, I hung onto it until it had been positively identified, and eventually concluded that Howland & Timms had better store it. You — ah — you do realize what beast it must have come from?"

"I haven't the faintest idea!" I blared, loudly enough to alarm several people sitting within earshot.

Unperturbed, Mr. Secrett gave a shrug. "I'm disappointed in you, scrivner. I thought you of all people would have realized straightaway what major carnivore was the worst threat to people living in the vicinity of what are now known as the La Brea Tar Pits."

"But — but there weren't any people there one and a half million years ago!"

"Suit yourself," he said with a shrug. "If you like, we can go back to the fur store and take the thing out, so you can sleep under it tonight and dream the same dream I did — the same, no doubt, that Lorna Ridge must have dreamed, and Cecile Deraine before her ... though she reacted more in the character of the chief than the sacrifice."

Taking a gulp from my drink, I said, "You seem to be talking about the saber-toothed tiger!"

"At last!" he crowed, and added severely, "Though one might better refer to it as Smilodon, since it wasn't a tiger and its coat was totally free of stripes."

I drew a deep breath, reviewing a range of possibilities, among which the most convincing was that Mr. Secrett's stint in the library at the Royal Society for Applied Linguistics had finally deprived him of his wits. At long last I said, "You're telling this story to the wrong person, you know. You should have picked on Laszlo Perkins. He'd be delighted to learn of human beings in California one and a half million years ago. He'd certainly make out they were left behind by a visiting starship!"

"My dear fellow!" Mr. Secrett's glasses nearly fell off his nose. "You mustn't for a moment think that I class you with Perkins and Casparole! I'm reminded of a comment I read concerning von Däniken, by an Australian professor of Egyptology, who stated that his major weakness was 'sheer ignorance,' and I'm convinced you're not guilty of that shortcoming, at least!"

What I knew I ought to do was march out of the pub and head back to work, but — well, I suppose I didn't want to waste the rest of my drink. So I said eventually, "O.K., fill in the rest of the gaps. What about van Groot and Cecile Deraine? What about this gigantic picture they were going to make?"

"It never happened."

"Surprise, surprise! Why not?"

Mr. Secrett flushed and looked away. "Rumor had it," he muttered, "that the demands Mlle Deraine im-

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posed on her paramour during shooting were in excess of what might have been expected of a person of her customary proclivities, if you see what I mean. He took to turning up late on the set and leaving early, so the picture ran over its budget, and the contracts of many of the lesser players expired, and it would have cost too much to renew them; and when the project was canceled, barely half the footage was 'in the can,' and Mega-Gorgon-Midas had poured a million dollars down the drain."

He spread his hands. "So they fired him, and her. But they stayed together. At last report they were running a restaurant in Iowa."

I had to laugh. I said, "Are you sure they didn't turn into a pair of Sweeney Todds, chopping up their customers in the back room?"

But he returned to me a grave, gray look. He said, "Now that you mention it: no, I'm not."

And glanced at his watch and made to rise. "Sorry my story didn't make a deeper impression," he went on. "I thought you of all people might take it at face value. Well, that's that. I'll see you sometime, I suppose."

"Just a moment!"

Why I said that, I'll never know. Perhaps I felt that I might retrieve something from my wasted day by filling the final gap in his narrative. At any rate I went on, "There are still some questions that you haven't answered."

Grumpily resuming his seat, he said, "Well, ask away."

"First, what makes you think that that fur coat has magic powers?"

"I never said it did," he began defensively.

I cut him short. "You've been trying to get me to believe that owing to it Cecile Deraine won back Jan van Groot and made off with him to the back of beyond. You've also been trying to convince me that it was because she'd been sleeping under it that Lorna Ridge jumped in the swimming pool and drowned!"

"I told you," he muttered. "The verdict was accident."

"You're dodging the point!"

"All right, I am," he sighed. "I shouldn't really be talking about this where anyone might overhear, but I'm sure if I invite you back to the library, you'll find an excuse for not coming...."

"What you're really asking, I suspect, is what Lorna saw in her dream, assuming it paralleled mine. Well, I had hoped that my poor command of narrative would suffice to define the sort of ceremony one assumes to have taken place when the aboriginal preeminence of women was usurped by males — even earlier than the point at which the menstrual shedding of blood from the female genitals, as a harbinger of the capacity to bring forth new life, was parodied by the rite of circumcision. In sum, the stage at which men discovered that instead of grubbing

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about for roots and worms to be taken home for the women to cook, because they were tenders of the holy fire, they could kill not only animals but one another, releasing the mystic warmth of living blood. Are there not even today, tribes whose main diet for their males consists in blood and milk?

"Well, be that as it may, I stand convinced: there was an episode in the far past when some strong man fought back against a predator from which the tribe had always fled — perhaps the very last, the weakest, oldest specimen to walk the earth! — and won the victory, and came home imbued with inspiration, and declared that by donning the beast's hide, he had acquired its power to murder humans, starting with the much-resented female priests. I can't be sure; could anyone? But it makes sense!"

After a fashion, I was bound to grant ... but since I wasn't Laszlo Perkins, I could just imagine what Mr. Agent would say were I to turn up in his office with this idea!

I continued my interrogation.

"I see!" I said. "You believe that this fur endows whoever wears it with the ambition of the man who fulfilled the wildest dreams his sex was capable of — in short, to supersede the female keepers of the hearth."

He beamed at me. "Precisely!" he declared. "To grant, in other words, his 'heart's desire.' "

"Then I have more questions than I thought I had," I said, cursing Mr. Secrett's ability to put quotation marks into ordinary speech. "First, what about the fact that a woman, namely Cecile Deraine — ?"

"Old chap, I thought I'd adumbrated that! Did I not say how remarkable it was that she should wish to return to van Groot's company? The studio publicity department had been put to considerable trouble to cover up her delinquencies."

I'd missed that, though it was true: he had implied it.

"O.K., O.K.! But you've made out the coat can grant one's dearest wish — "

"At a cost," he interjected. "There always has to be a sacrifice."

"Oh, for pity's sake — !"

"Pity back then was not a fashionable virtue!"

"Then for common sense's sake!" I burst out. "You say you wore the thing throughout your journey home."

"Indeed I did," he answered stiffly.

"Night and day?"

"Yes!"

"And whom were *you* obliged to sacrifice?"

There followed a long pause, during which by degrees he drew himself up until a gleam of pride transformed his face. I had never thought him capable of looking noble, but for that brief moment I could think of no other term.

He said at last, "I'm sorry that you

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have to ask. Am I the sort of fellow who could want another person dead?"

And rose and left so quickly I could not reply. But the answer came to me before I did the same.

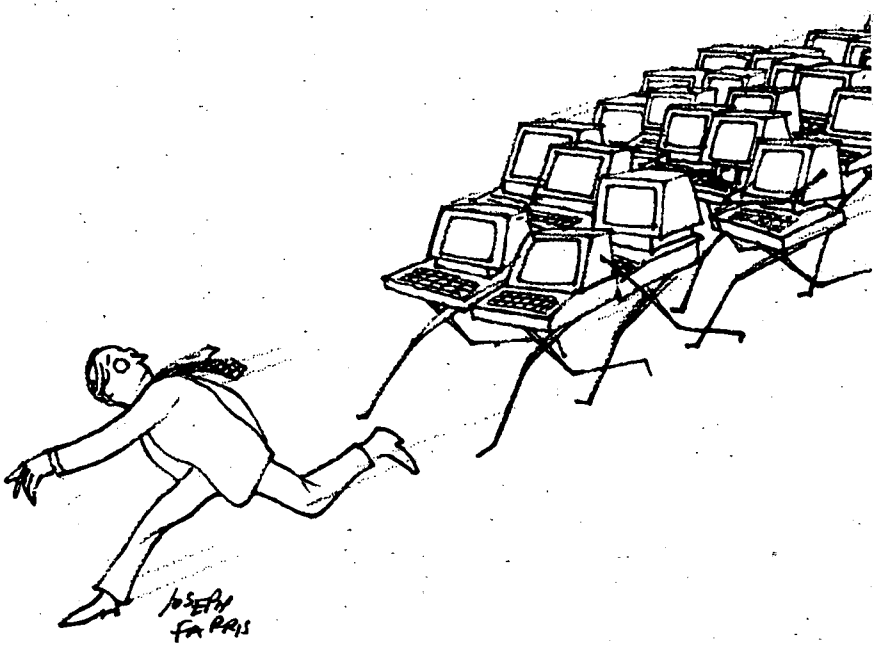
Of course.

Himself.

Is there really in a dismal London warehouse the skin of a saber-toothed tiger on which a spell was cast before most scientists believe our ancestors were human?

I could find out. I could demand of Mr. Secrett the carbon-dating report he mentioned, to prove its age. Then, of course, I could borrow the fur from store, as he suggested, and see what dreams I have while sleeping under it.

But I'm afraid to. Call me a coward if you like, but I'm afraid. I hope it may be long and long before I once more cross the path of Mr. Secrett.



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Installment 9: *In Which the Fortunate Reader Gets to Peek Inside the Fabled Black Tower*

If the Universal Studios Tower didn't exist, it would have to be invented. By some noted fabulist like Borges; or Satie or Arcimboldo; by Gaudi or the Brothers Grimm; more likely by Clifford Irving. (And within days Glen A. Larson — far-famed for his creation of such original television concepts as *Alias Smith and Jones, BJ and the Bear* and *Battlestar Galactica* — would have erected, out of cardboard and mucilage, an approximation of the Black Tower just a few miles farther along the Cahuenga Pass.)

At no two consecutive points, one often feels, does what goes on in the Tower touch the rational universe.

The Universal Tower rises from the North Hollywood flats like a Kubrick monolith farted off the Lunar surface. There are rumors Childe Roland is still a prisoner up there on the fifteenth floor. On moonless nights, when the ghosts of Universal executives who thought *A Countess from Hong Kong, The Island* and *Streets of Fire* would be smash hits drift silently around the back lot, ectoplasmic hands clapped over ectoplasmic ears in vain endeavor to block out the heavy metal caterwauling from the Universal Amphitheater, if one whizzes past the Tower on the Hollywood Freeway, one can still hear Rapunzel shrieking her guts out for someone to

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climb up her hair and release her from her starlet's contract.

For five years, commencing on Thursday, September 18th, 1698, the Bertaudiere Tower in the Bastille of Paris held a nameless prisoner whose face was covered by a black velvet cloth that Dumas *père* transformed into "a visor of polished steel soldered to a helmet of the same nature."

For seven weeks, commencing Monday, November 15th, 1971, the northwest corner of the 9th floor of the Universal Tower held a nameless writer whose mind was covered by a black smog ABC-TV transformed into "a lemminglike urge to hurl oneself through the ninth floor window to a messy fadeout."

For seven weeks Dopplering toward, through, and past Christmas 1971, I sold my soul to Universal Studios, then-president Lew Wasserman, a producer named Stan Shpetner, a primetime tv series called *The Sixth Sense*, the American Broadcasting Company, and anybody else who would make a reasonable bid on damaged goods, tacky remnants, floating ethics, and seriously flawed seconds; in short, I departed in a moment of greed and weakness from eleven years as a film and television *writer* to join the enemy on the other side of the desk. Yes, brethren and sistren, I became a story editor. Uck yichh choke!

As the Christ child's natal day celebration neared in that watershed year of 1971, I found myself standing in the stairwell between the eighth and ninth floors of the Black Tower, rattling the walls with Primal Screams that brought secretaries running from all directions to help the poor soul who was obviously being disemboweled. Soon thereafter, mere minutes later, I leaped onto Stan Shpetner's desk, did a deranged adagio, terminated my employment, and fled televison for a decade.

(That I have, of late, returned to television is an odd story for yet another day.)

Nor did I, during that decade, have much to do with the Studio of the Black Tower. Once having been touched by the lunacy of that self-contained vertical universe, I tried to live by the wisdom Voltaire demonstrated when, having attended an orgy and having comported himself (we are told) with heroic verve and expertise, refused a second invitation with the classic rejoinder, "Once: a philosopher; twice: a pervert."

Or in the words of Oscar Wilde: "Experience is the name everyone gives to his mistakes."

Recently, however, as the needs of this column have demanded, I have been thrown into assorted liaisons with Universal. I as reviewer, they as hustlers of product they wish reviewed. This is a symbiotic relationship much like that melded from the association of the hippopotamus and the ox-pecker, or tick bird (*Buphaginus Africanus*).

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And I must confess I had forgotten how deranged things can get up there at the Black Tower. I select the word *deranged* from among the many words available to me, with great care. (There is a legend — certainly intended to be apocryphal — that in a manner similar to that of the apemen being brought to the Black Monolith in *2001* so they could touch it and have their intelligence raised, so it is that television producers are brought to the monolith of the Black Tower, they lay their hands upon it, and their intelligence is *lowered.*) Yes, I think deranged is the proper adjective; particularly when Universal makes a corporate decision to scramble all its eggs in one basket.

DUNE.

The breath catches when the name is spoken. In the truest sense of the flack-artist's phrase, *Dune* has been one of the most eagerly-awaited sf films of all time. The publicity mill began its abrasive work against the public consciousness in 1969, just four years after the Chilton hardcover was published, combining the two serials John Campbell had first published as "Dune World" (1963-64) and "Prophet of Dune" (1965). Arthur Jacobs, who had produced for 20th Century-Fox the enormously popular *Planet of the Apes* films and the financially-disastrous *Dr. Dolittle,* optioned the book for what would be considered a laughable sum in the light of today's knowledge that the Dune books have sold more than 15 million copies, not to mention that the current option prices even for trash bestsellers are now computed in numbers that could have wiped out the Holy Roman Empire's entire budget deficit. Jacobs died in 1973 and so did the first *Dune* film deal.

Seven years later, surrealist director Alejandro Jodorowsky, Chilean-born, underground famous for *El Topo* — the weirdest "western" ever filmed if you agree that the concept of Jesus as Gunslinger do tend to diddle Jung's archetypal images more than somewhat — secured backing, optioned the book, wrote a script, and began hiring as astonishing an artistic braintrust as *any* filmmaker had ever assembled: British paperback cover artist Chris Foss, whose spaceships were painted as if they'd been sculpted out of Silly Putty; "Moebius," the *Metal Hurlant* comic artist whose distinctive style in such extended works as *L'Homme Est-Il Bon? (Is Man Good?), Cauchemar Blanc* and *Arzach* had influenced an entire generation of Anglo-American illustrators; the Swiss designer H.R. Giger, who would later provide the psychosexually arresting look of *Alien*; Salvador Dali; Dan O'Bannon (*Alien, Blue Thunder, Dark Star*) and the nonpareil Ron Cobb. Two million dollars was spent just on salaries for the visionaries. I have seen some of Giger's bizarre, brilliant paintings for Jodorowsky's vision of *Dune,* and if ac-

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nados of the novels have been less than overwhelmed by the eventually-filmed sandworms of Arrakis, I submit that their spines would have been pumped full of Freon had Giger's Arrakeen horror been realized.

But by Christmas of 1975, the volatile combination of Jodorowsky, parvenu backers, erratic artists and banks wary of putting up a completion bond for the film exploded and two years' worth of planning, writing and preproduction went into the dumper. Lights dim; and the myth dozes.

Leaves fly off the calendar. Seasons change. The Proscenium is cleared, flats are taken to storage, the cyclorama is repainted, and in 1978 a new cast of characters enter stage right as Dino DeLaurentiis buys into the nightmare the *Dune* dream has become. And he opens the third act of the drama by commissioning Frank Herbert to write a new screenplay.

Digression: in the twenty-two years I've spent working in the visual mediums of film and television, it has been made painfully clear to me that the "rule of thumb," widespread in the industry, that most writers of books and stories simply cannot write screenplays ... is correct. Like most old saws, it is a bit of True Writ based solidly in history and personal experience. There is a reason Scott Fitzgerald was yoked with such as Charles Marquis Warren and Budd Schulberg on studio scriptwriting assignments.

When I was working on *Star Trek* in 1966, I went out on the limb half a dozen times by urging Gene Roddenberry and then-story editor John D.F. Black to consider signing well-known sf authors to write segments. Six or eight were, in fact, hired. Of those who had no previous credits as scenarists, only two produced material that was eventually filmed. As for the others, some of the most respected names in the print medium: they just didn't have a clue. What they brought forth — even after extensive meetings and revisions and demonstrations of how a scene could be made to work, and finally even after-hours get-togethers in which scenes were actually rewritten for them — was pathetic.

Even as there are *apparatchiks* of the Eastern Literary Establishment (a state of place and mind we who live here in literary Coventry t'other side of the Rockies are constantly assured by such as Barbara Epstein of *The New York Review of Books* and Mitchel Levitas of *The New York Times Book Review* is only a fevered conjuration of our California-vanilla paranoia) who believe that the presence of too much sunshine and an absence of a dozen police locks on the apartment door prevents us out here from writing Great Art, there are writers who smugly contend that writing for the screens, big and small, is merely a five-finger exercise any Real Writer can perform, a chore fit only for Hacks. I smile far more smugly than they, when I hear such twaddle. Let

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them try, I say; as you would to one of those culinary *machos* who announces at your favorite Thai or Tex-Mex restaurant that "there ain't a salsa living that's too hot for me!" Let them try, I say. Heh heh heh.

Because for every William Goldman, William Faulkner or Robert Bloch who can swing both ways, book to film and back, there are *thousands* of narrative writers who have fruitlessly thumped their noggins against the enigma of how to write cinematically. It does not detract one iota from their craftsmanship in writing for print, but it ought to humble them summat when next they run a denigration ramadoola about those who *can* hear the song, those who *can* conjure the dream, those who *can* write words to be spoken and action to be actualized.

Which is not to say that Frank Herbert ever manifested such snobbery. Nonetheless, his 175-page screenplay was, by all reports, utterly unworkable. Unshootable because of Frank's inability to prune it, trim it, straightline it, free it of the endless distractions of subplots and minutiae. End of digression.

So Frank Herbert was taken off the project and DeLaurentiis decided to go in another direction with the project. He opted for the method of hiring a highly visual director, and letting *him* find the proper scenarist. In 1979 Dino signed Ridley Scott. *Alien* was hot, and the English director seemed right for what was now considered an impossible project that would break the hearts of men or women no matter how tough and talented they might be. Ridley Scott went looking for writers.

On Thursday, September 27th, 1979 Ridley Scott came for a breakfast meeting at my home and offered me the assignment to write *Dune*. He was very nice about it when I told him I would sooner spend my declining years vacationing on Devil's Island. Further, with the wisdom and foresight that has made me a Delphic legend in my own time, with the kind of bold extrapolative thinking personified by Charles H. Duell (who, as Commissioner of the U.S. Office of Patents in 1899, implored President William McKinley to abolish his office because, "Everything that can be invented *has been* invented"), I assured Scott that this was a book so complex and vast in scope that it never *could* be made, for anything under a hundred million dollars. And yet further, I said with sagacity, "Besides, who needs to see *Dune* when David Lean has already made *Lawrence of Arabia*? It's just *King of Kings* with sandworms. No," I said, vibrating with a richness of perspicacity unparalleled since Custer opined that he could kick the crap out of them redskins up there on the hill, "no, this is a fool's enterprise. There isn't a writer living or dead who could beat this project."

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Digression: Scott said something remarkable that has stuck in my mind. He said, "The time is ripe for a John Ford of science fiction films. I'm going to be that director." And maybe he hasn't achieved that yet, but sooner the man who helmed *Alien* and *Blade Runner* and *The Duellists* than John Carpenter of George Lucas or Joe Dante. End of digression II.

Though I like to think Ridley's spirit was crushed at not being able to suffer the torments of the damned by having had the bad sense to hire me, he pulled himself together like the special talent he is, and he hired Rudolph Wurlitzer.

Wurlitzer's has been a strange filmwriting career.

In April of 1971 — just four months before the magazine would abandon the 10" x 13" bedsheet format it had held for 38 years — *Esquire* ran as its hot cover feature a screenplay titled *Two Lane Blacktop* with the blurb READ IT FIRST! OUR NOMINATION FOR THE MOVIE OF THE YEAR! The screenplay was by Rudolph Wurlitzer and Will Corry.

Well, the film dropped into an abyss and, though it has becme something of a cult classic and is an interesting item because of a Warren Oates performance that is a killer, and some offbeat direction by Monte Hellman, not only wasn't it the movie of the year, it vanished without a plop! In the same year Wurlitzer's screenplay for a post-holocaust film called *Glen and Randa* was produced. Another miraculous non-event in cinema history though, again, an interesting piece of writing. Then in 1973 Sam Peckinpah directed Wurlitzer's gawd-awful screenplay of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid,* starring James Coburn and (wait for it) Kris Kristofferson. That one created its *own* black hole down which it plunged.

And that was it. No other produced credits exist as of this writing for Wurlitzer. But in 1979 Ridley Scott put Rudy Wurlitzer to work. The most memorable aspect of the three drafts Wurlitzer wrote was his departure from the novel to include a relationship that poor, misguided Frank Herbert had overlooked: a sexual liaison between Paul Atreides and his mother, the Lady Jessica.

Have you ever heard Frank Herbert bellow with rage?

The Sargasso Sea came unblocked. Avalanches on the Siberian Peninsula. Magma solidified. The stars shook.

By 1980 the deal was dead. Scott went on to *Blade Runner,* Wurlitzer went underground, and De Laurentiis went looking for new foot troops to throw into what was becoming the cinematic equivalent of Hitler's Russian campaign.

Dune.

The name had become legend. The bodies that lay in its sandworm track could have populated another whole film industry.

But in 1981 De Laurentiis shocked

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even those of us who are beyond shock, by signing the director of *Eraserhead* and *The Elephant Man*, and David Lynch stepped up bravely to inhale them bullets.

Four years later *Dune* was a reality, more than forty million dollars had been expended in its production, the world trembled at its imminent release, and in mere moments before it hit the screens of the world, everything hit the fans in that equally-fabled Black Tower where derangement is a way of life.

And in the next issue I'll bring you full circle, as one with the Laocoönian serpent, to complete the bizarre story of Frank Herbert, *Dune,* De Laurentiis father and daughter, untold millions of dollars and lira, and the strange rituals of the priests of the Black Tower.

Don't miss this one, kids. You'll boogie till you puke.

PUBLIC NOTICE: Got a call today from my friend Bill Warren. Bill is a film critic, author of a nifty book on Fifties sf movies, and a cinema researcher who works with the Hollywood Film Archive. When it comes to movies, Bill's middle name is *knowledgeable.* Sometimes, amazingly, our opinions agree on a specific film. For years we have taken mutual pleasure in passionate arguments about the nature of movies. In my installment 7 (F&SF, March), in the time-honored tradition of gigging my chums, I took Bill's (and Steve Boyett's) name in

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vain. I said that these "alleged movie buffs" accepted a philosophy expressed by many duplicitous filmmakers that one should not take seriously the evil and gruesome aspects of some films because they were really only live action "cartoons." The word *alleged* was, of course, intended as goodnatured elbow-in-the-ribs hyperbole. That Bill and Steve have expressed to me their concurrence with the "don't take it seriously, it's just a cartoon" disclaimer is true. They've said it to me on a number of occasions, about a number of films. In the case of Bill, most recently in reference to *Gremlins*; Steve said it a short time ago about *Buckaroo Banzai*. But Bill called me in a state of upset today, to say I owe him an apology in the same public forum where I defamed him, in his view. He read my remarks in that column to say that he is a liar. I did not call Bill Warren a liar, nor anything even remotely like it. As far as I know, Bill Warren is not a liar. Nor was I calling Steve Boyett a liar. What I *did* say, is what I said; and it was intended to make my friends smile ruefully. But Bill feels I have done him a mischief. Because he is my friend, and because I respect him, I will apologize here in print, on the off-chance that someone else may have interpreted my remarks in a way I did not intend; but I apologize mostly because Bill is upset, and he is my friend. So one does this sort of thing for friends.

But really, Bill, you shouldn't take it all so seriously: it was just a cartoon.

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Walter Jon Williams wrote five mainstream novels before switching to science fiction. His first SF novel, Ambassador of Progress, *appeared from Tor in April of 1984, and his second,* Knight Moves, *was recently released, also by Tor. He writes that he is 30 and writes full time. He lives in "New Mexico with an old-model automobile and a late-model computer." With this story, his first for* F&SF, *he reveals a world of sex, drugs and "Side Effects."*

Side Effects

BY
WALTER JON WILLIAMS

1.

TOLINAL (Registered Trademark)

Prescribing information for this product, which appears on pages 788 and 789 of the PDR, has been revised as follows. Write "See Supplement B" alongside the product heading. Delete the first paragraph of the WARNINGS section and replace with the following:

Warnings: Hypomagnesemia, hypocalcemia, hypokalemia, and hypophoshatemia have been reported to occur in patients treated with Tolinal and are probably related to renal tubular damage. Tetany has occasionally been reported in those patients with hypocalcemia and hypomagnesemia. Generally normal serum electrolyte levels are restored by administering supplemental electrolytes and discontinuing Tolinal.

2.

Angel Hernandez was in his fifties; his hands were calloused, and massive corded muscles enveloped his neck, evidence of a life of manual labor. Old blue tattoos on his forearms were only partially hidden by the rolled-up sleeves. There was a softness around his middle that suggested a fairly steady consumption of beer, but the rest of him was hard. To come and speak to the doctor, he had worn a tie.

His wife, Filomena, was in her fifties. What had probably once been a voluptuous form had become heavy and shapeless, but her ankles were still delicate above the open-toed high heel sandals she'd worn even through

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the freezing East Coast spring. Her broad face was expressionless; her white hair was tied back. There were dark smudges beneath her eyes, and in spite of the plumpness of her face, heavy jowls were forming at the corners of her rosebud mouth. She sat in the chair, looking down at her polished toenails. Her husband did all the talking.

According to her records, she had carried seven living children in ten years. Incredible, Dr. Winkelstein thought. How can people live like this?

"The thing is," Hernandez said. His voice was hesitant. "Is that she don't mind most of it. All ladies gotta dry up, I guess. But, you know, it *hurts*. It hurts her, I mean."

It took Dr. Winkelstein a few seconds to realize what Hernandez was saying. Oh, Christ, he thought, suddenly understanding. How stupid can these people be? Carefully he assumed a grave and professional expression.

"Mr. Hernandez," he said. Hernandez leaned forward to better hear his soft voice: Winkelstein often took care to speak in low tones, finding that it helped people to pay attention. "The decrease of vaginal secretions is a common side effect of menopause. But there are treatments that can relieve it. They've been available for years." He swiveled his chair toward his desk and reached for his pen.

Hernandez looked at him with hopeless eyes. "How much these treatments gonna cost, Doctor?" he asked. "I been off unemployment for three months, and things are kinda bad right now."

Winkelstein, his eyes on his desk, nodded and reached for the permission forms he kept in his drawer. "Under the new regulations," he said, "the standard hormone creams won't be covered by Medicaid. But don't worry." He began filling out the form, copying carefully from Filomena Hernandez's file in his strong hand. Kimberlee, he wondered. What am I going to say to Kimberlee when I get home? It would be her second abortion, and she was only seventeen. It wasn't as if there weren't birth control available, for chrissakes; he'd prescribed it himself. And her grades were so awful he despaired of getting her into a good school. At least Norton Junior was shaping up well, in his third year of premed at Yale and getting excellent grades.

"I was just going to mention that there's a new program just started," Winkelstein said. "Tempel is making a new product available, and we can prescribe it to your wife. It won't cost you anything."

"We don't have to pay?" Hernandez looked startled for a moment, then grinned. "That's pretty good, Doc."

"If your wife could fill out this form," Winkelstein said. He turned toward them in his chair, a sheaf of white, blue, pink, and yellow flimsies

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in his hand. Hernandez scanned them with a baffled expression, then he knit his brows and began working his way through the print syllable by syllable. His lips moved as he read. He looked up at Winkelstein with a surprised expression.

"It says somethin' about my wife being used for in-ves-ti-gational purposes," he said, spelling it out slowly. "What's that mean?"

"It means that since we're dealing with a new product, I'm required to obtain the consent of Mrs. Hernandez before we can start," he said. "Don't worry. What it means is that Mrs. Hernandez will have very good care while she's in the program, including free monthly checkups."

Doubt clouded Hernandez's eyes, but he pursed his lips and began reading again. Winkelstein nodded thoughtfully to himself. He had long ago learned never to use the word *experimental* around a patient. For some reason they often took fright.

"Mrs. Hernandez," he said softly. For the first time she looked up, her eyes docile, uncomprehending. "Do you have any other symptoms? Hot flashes, night sweats, dizziness, headaches? Perhaps we can help you with those."

3.

TEMPEL PHARMACEUTICALS
GRANTS-IN-AID
STATEMENT OF AGREEMENT

Grant No. 89-T-002

I, Norton G. Winkelstein, M.D., agree to conduct a study of evaluating the efficacy of Tynadette as reliever of certain postmenopausal symptoms according to the attached protocol approved by the American Division of Tempel Pharmaceuticals, Inc., and me, dated March 22, 1983.

I understand that the total approved grant for this study is forty thousand — dollars. The initial payment will be $10,000. Subsequent payments will be made according to the following schedule:

$10,000 upon completion of 1/2 of the case reports.

$10,000 upon completion of 2/3 of the case reports.

$10,000 upon completion of twenty-five (25) case reports....

4.

Thanks, Doc," Hernandez said, and stuck out his hand. Winkelstein looked down at it with antiseptic disapproval, then shook it. He looked over Hernandez's shoulder at his wife's submissive features.

"My girl will give you a card with your appointment time," he said. "Put it somewhere where you can see it." He had no confidence in Filomena Hernandez's ability to remember appointment dates.

The woman nodded and flashed a smile — and for a moment, to Winkelstein's surprise, a beautiful young lady

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shone through the wreckage. She must have been quite a catch when she was young.

In the end she had signed the Informed Consent Form twice; once for the Tynadette study, another for a study for The Baum Company's Pharmacological Laboratories for a drug designed to suppress Mrs. Hernandez's hot flashes and night sweats. It was against the study rules, though not the law, to give the same patient more than one experimental drug; but Winkelstein had never seen sense in that. He'd prescribe as he saw fit: and what Tempel and The Baum Company didn't know, wouldn't hurt them.

Winkelstein approved of the precision of the new drugs. Instead of a broadband treatment of the symptoms, the new drugs targeted each symptom individually. There would be fewer side effects that way, less interference with the metabolism.

He saw the Hernandezes on their way and then turned to wash his hands. They were his last case of the day. It was three o'clock, and on his Health Group days he always left early, hoping to get out of Brooklyn before the rush started. He hated traffic: there was a kind of squalid fervor to it that always upset him.

He took off his white coat, then stepped to the hall closet where he kept his jacket. He put it on, smoothing the lapels, and then walked to the mirror at the end of the hall to straighten his tie. He could hear the voice of Dr. Asad Ashraf through the transom above the examining room door.

"Why don't you wash?" Ashraf asked. His clipped voice displayed annoyance.

I'm *bleeding*," came the answer. From the sound of her voice, the girl was in her teens.

"I don't care. You should wash," Ashraf said.

Winkelstein frowned and listened, but Ashraf began to mutter, and he could hear no more. Good, Winkelstein thought. He didn't want to have to speak to the man.

Winkelstein owned the Brooklyn Family Health Group in partnership with Dr. Irving Sussman. Winkelstein and Sussman had their regular practices on Long Island and only spent one day each week at the Health Group. The day-to-day work was done by young M.D's fresh from school, trying to earn enough to pay off their school debts or buy into a practice somewhere. Here in New York, many of the young doctors were Indians, Pakistanis, or, like Ashraf, Iranians. They all worked hard, but many of them had odd, fastidious cultural notions with regard to basic feminine biological realities. It made Winkelstein wonder why they went into family practice in the first place.

Winkelstein picked up his briefcase and left the building by the back stair. He wanted to avoid the waiting room: it wasn't any of his patients' business when he left — and besides,

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he always felt a strange, reproachful, and unpleasant contrast when he saw many of his Health Group patients at once. Here in the Health Group, his patients were elderly or disadvantaged, single mothers and young girls without education, the unemployed, the mentally deficient, the foreign-born or hopeless or down-on-their-luck or alcoholic. There were a lot of blacks and Puerto Ricans. Their children were always with them, usually wandering unsupervised in the waiting room, getting in people's way. The vast majority didn't carry insurance. Winkelstein couldn't understand how people could live like that.

Nevertheless, these people got sick, and it was possible to help them when they did. The state paid most of their bills, and it was often possible to get them on one program or another from one of the pharmaceutical companies. One thing about family practice was that there was always an enormous variety in terms of illness displayed, which the pharmaceutical companies loved because they were always producing a vast number of new chemicals that needed approval.

New birth control pills — Winkelstein did a lot of business in those. Other methods of birth control. Pills to relieve arthritic swelling. New methods of asthma relief. Pain relievers. Experimental antibiotics. New hormonal treatments. Interferon. An enormous flow of medicine to help treat heart conditions. Most had never been tested before, except supposedly on animals. The companies needed human subjects, and were willing to pay any qualified M.D. who provided them.

Filomena Hernandez was a good example. Winkelstein was being paid forty thousand dollars by Tempel Pharmaceuticals to produce twenty-five case studies complying with FDA formalities — which in this case were purely formalities, since Winkelstein happened to know that the FDA had given approval before receiving all the follow-up studies, and that Tempel was mass-marketing the drug within the next six months. All that Winkelstein's study really meant was that Winkelstein would make sixteen hundred dollars from Mrs. Hernandez alone, and during that time all he had to do to earn the money was sign a few forms, hand out the drugs, and give a free pelvic exam once a month for the next six months.

On top of the Tempel study, Winkelstein was also getting $32,000 from The Baum Company for the second product Mrs. Hernandez was testing, which meant another $1,250 for the same patient, with no extra work except signing a few forms after having the clerical staff fill them out.

Mrs. Hernandez was typical. Winkelstein could usually get his patients onto more than one program, the heart patients in particular because there were so many new products jumping onto the market all the time.

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The Family Health Group was turning record profits.

Which was good, because though the profits from Winkelstein's regular practice on Long Island were still higher than those of the Health Group, they were declining. There was no denying that people in general — those who could afford to take care of themselves, anyway — were healthier than they had been. Better diet, more exercise, more care about overwork....

It was too bad health was so bad for business.

5.

TEMPEL PHARMACEUTICALS, INC.
ANNUAL REPORT
PRETAX AND NET INCOME
FROM CONTINUING OPERATIONS
(Figures in millions of dollars)

	1983 (estimated*)	1982	1981
Net Sales	4,281.1	3,885.5	3,562.1
Pretax income	721.7	601.3	521.7
Taxes on income	327.6	299.7	245.2
Net income from continuing operations	394.1	301.6	276.5

*Best estimate based on current growth rates.

6.

Dr. William Trilling looked down at the New York City streets through the glass wall of his office, hearing the gusty wind that blew flurries of rain against the pane. The streets were jammed with cars, none of which were moving. The people below, hunched beneath their umbrellas as they walked crabwise against the wind, looked like determined little blips on a video game screen, dodging the cars and one another. "Bleep, bleep," said Dr. Trilling, providing the sound effects himself. "Bleep. *Pow!*" Then another thought struck him.

My God, he thought in dawning amazement. How can people *live* like that?

He worked hard at maintaining his optimism, but sometimes it was hard.

He returned to his desk and glanced at the paper work that Natalia Latoni, his head girl, had put in his In box earlier in the day. Realizing that his optimism was going to need a little help today, he carefully opened the upper drawer of his desk and glanced at the rows and rows of pills. Working for the Experimental Drugs Division of Tempel Pharmaceuticals had its perks.

Dr. Trilling had no patients, no practice, and no phone calls summoning him to hospital bedsides at inconvenient hours: that was the advantage of being in research. His job was strictly supervisory; he and his colleagues oversaw the various field-testing programs of Tempel Pharmaceuticals throughout the world.

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He took two Oronidol, which would serve to lengthen his attention span and create in him a kind of rapt fascination for his paper work; and then he took a Calispeiron, a stimulant that would serve to counteract the Parankalon that he'd taken earlier in the day in order to numb his sensations during the long commute into town.

Dr. Trilling loved the new generation of psychotropic drugs. They selected the parts of the brain they wanted and left the others alone, a process that appealed to his sense of efficiency and economy. He found them invaluable in maintaining his basic optimism.

7.

Bennie Lovett opened his umbrella briefly and snorted his speedball in its shelter. He was going to need a little artificial motivation for this one, because the rain had been turning the ground to muck for weeks. This cemetery in Hempstead was going to be an awful, sloppy job, but he was out of money and this was one of the better ways he knew to raise cash in a hurry.

Quickly, he bent to the sodden turf and cut the sod neatly into squares, which he stacked to one side. Then he removed the headstone, got out his shovel, and began to dig. The walls of his trench kept liquefying, and he had to keep shoring it up, but after he stopped for another speedball, the work went quickly.

There was an art to grave robbing, Bennie Lovett had discovered. A grave with a high mound on it was too recent, and it meant that the skull would be hard to clean, with all the dead muscle and tissue still clinging to it. A grave with a depression over it meant the coffin underneath had collapsed and possibly crushed the skeleton under its weight. The best was a level grave, which meant it was just old enough for the cadaver's muscle and tissue to fade, turn brittle, and lose its strength.

Bennie struck the coffin, cleared the rest of the soil out, and breathed a sigh of relief that at least it was a wooden coffin. The fucking bronze ones were a bitch. He got out his axe and chopped vigorously for a few moments, then peeled back the lid to the lead inner coffin and shone his flashlight on the cadaver. An old guy, apparently, in his best suit with a gold watch and chain. Bennie pocketed the watch and chain, then hefted his ax and cut off the head with a well-placed blow.

He hefted the skull, examining it carefully in the light. It was perfect — just little bits of skin and sinew left, and a mild acid bath would soon get rid of those. He put the skull in his bag. He planned to raid two other graves before morning.

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8.

The baby's heart sounded strong and clear. Winkelstein disengaged the stethoscope from his ears and fit them carefully on the head of the mother-to-be. He watched her eyes widen in joy as she heard the heartbeat.

"Wow," she said, and then grinned. "It's fast," she said.

"A hundred forty beats per minute, give or take," Winkelstein said. He gave a smile and returned to his desk. "You've had an exceptional pregnancy, Mrs. Lasley, for a woman your age," he said. "Remarkably free of any difficulties. We have every reason to expect an uncomplicated birth and a healthy child."

Isadora Lasley, her eyes dreamy as she listened to the baby's heartbeat, nodded abstractedly. She was thirty-eight, owned a pair of expensive boutiques, and was married to a weathy contractor. This would be her first delivery. She'd opted for natural childbirth without anesthetics, a choice Winkelstein wasn't exactly overjoyed with but one he was willing to concede as being in the realm of her choice — though he knew some anesthetists who were livid about these things. Not that it mattered in this case: Winkelstein would have an anesthetist standing by anyway.

His nurse helped Mrs. Lasley to the dressing room. He went to his office and waited for her to reappear.

She had spared no expense in regard to her child, going through about every expensive prenatal test ever devised. She had cats, so he'd tested for toxoplasmosis; she'd had anmiocentesis early on to look for possible birth defects, and there had been ultrasound checks to make certain it wasn't a tubal pregnancy. She'd tested for herpes and cytomegalic and a handful of other unlikely possibilities. She had been careful about her weight and diet, had reduced her social drinking, and given up smoking. Winkelstein and his wife saw the Lasleys socially at least a half a dozen times each year. The contrast with his Health Group patients was heartwarming.

Winkelstein picked up his pen. "I'd like to do another B-scan in a couple of weeks or so to make sure the baby's in the right position for delivery. Every indication so far shows the baby will be making its appearance on schedule. I suppose we should think about making reservations at the hospital."

Isadora's eyes slowly lost their cloudy look. She frowned as she looked at Winkelstein. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Norton," she said slowly. "I think I want to have the baby at home."

Winkelstein returned the pen to its stand with careful precision and gazed at Isadora with unblinking brown eyes. "I don't do home deliveries, Mrs. Lasley," he said. "I don't regard them as safe. Especially not in

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the case of a woman your age." She looked as if she were about to say something, and he spoke quickly and firmly. "If you hemorrhage, Mrs. Lasley, you can bleed to death in minutes. There's nothing I can do about it outside a hospital. If the baby doesn't breath right, I'd have to be able to have treatment available on the spot, otherwise there could be brain damage or worse."

"You said we'd be fine!"

"I said the chances were, you and the baby would be fine. But there's always the chance you won't be."

Isadora gazed stubbornly at nothing in particular for a moment. Winkelstein spoke on. "And just in case, I'd like to keep you monitored and have an anesthetist standing by. You might change your mind about anesthesia, you know. It's been done." Winkelstein sensed her resistance eroding, and he hastened to his final argument.

"On top of all that, Mrs. Lasley, you might be in labor for hours and hours, and in a home birth situation, I'd have to be right there all the time — maybe for an entire twenty-four-hour period, maybe longer. In a hospital they have nurses to take care of you during that time. But my being absent for all that time — it just isn't fair to my other patients. I can't afford to be away from them for a full day or more."

He saw her blink slowly and thought he'd convinced her. That argument usually worked well: don't do it for me, do it for my other patients.

Isadora spoke uncomfortably, her gaze moving rapidly about the room, never lighting on Winkelstein. "Well. You see, my husband has a niece. Whose name is Alice. Who's just become a midwife. She could take care of me till it's time for you to come."

"I see." Well, so that's where the ideas were coming from: he hadn't seen Isadora as the sort to pick up this kind of trendy medical chic on her own. Winkelstein frowned at her and picked his words carefully. "I don't want to speak against your husband's relatives, Mrs. Lasley," he said. "Midwives were all very well and good in the eighteenth century, I suppose, but they're not needed now, and a lot of their attitudes are ... well, I suppose *unprofessional* is the only way to describe them."

"I'll have to think about it," said Isadora. There was a stubborn firmness in her eyes.

"We can talk about it again at your B-scan," Winkelstein said. "But remember, I won't do home deliveries. It's a firm principle with me. And, as I said, it's not fair to my other patients."

"Alice knows a doctor who will," said Isadora.

A wave of red fury rose in Winkelstein and stayed with him for the rest of Isadora's visit. So the new brand of holier-than-thou, the holistic medical doctor — no doubt with a forty-dollar

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haircut and fresh-cut flowers on his desk — had no objection to poaching on another doctor's preserves, did he? Or was it *she*? And with palpably unsafe techniques to boot. What about professional courtesy? What about medical ethics? Winkelstein had been as ambitious as any when he was young, but he'd never gone in for poaching.

He saw Isadora to the door and spent the next few minutes drumming angry fingers on his desk top. Another one gone, he thought. Next he'd have some woman who wanted to deliver her kid underwater ... he'd heard that was getting to be quite a fashion these days.

Who the hell could understand them? The same woman who'd gone to the barricades in defense of abortion worried her head off about birth trauma.

Ah, well. At least he still had the Health Group. People there didn't have the financial wherewithal to root around among treatments for the most fashionable. They took what he gave them and were glad to get it.

His eyes slid to his desk, to the framed photographs of his family. There they were, smiling in frozen perfection against a powder-blue backdrop, each surrounded by a kind of glowing artful halo. Winkelstein, his wife, Norton Junior, and Kimberlee. Taken three years ago now. Before the vice-principal found pot in Kimberlee's locker at school, and before she'd had her first abortion.

The second had been last week. He'd tried to talk to Kimberlee since, but he'd always had to shout at her over an aural wall composed of Joe Voss and the Vidiots, and he'd given up. The girl simply hadn't any basis for making decisions, he thought. She'd been brought up in affluence and didn't know what she was throwing away.

Too bad she'd never worked at the Health Group, he thought savagely. Give her a dose of reality she'd never forget.

An idea descended upon Winkelstein like a warm fuzzy blue blanket. Why the hell not? he thought. He needed clerical help at the moment in order to process all the forms for Tempel and The Baum Company and the rest. He began to picture his darling little princess among the losers and diseased in the Health Group office, and began to smile.

His intercom buzzed.

"Dr. Winkelstein, one of the reps from Tempel is here. Are you available?"

Not what he needed. His next half hour was free, and he wanted some room to think without cluttering up his mind with complimentary pens and bits of pharmaceutical literature.

"Tell him I have only a few minutes," he said grudgingly.

A long, close-cropped head thrust sideways throught the door. "Hi, Dr. Winkelstein," said Homer Bernstein.

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"Just thought I'd drop off some pens and some literature." He walked into the room, fished into his pocket, and brought out a handful of Tempel Pharmaceuticals, Inc., ballpoint pens. Then he opened his case and brought out an armful of glossy, highly colored folders, advertisements for new Tempel products. "Here's a nice little booklet on use of Interferon," Bernstein said. "And another on using the new-generation psychotrophic drugs to help treat the elderly." Winkelstein nodded politely. Then Bernstein reached into his case and flashed Winkelstein a devilish grin.

"You're not gonna *believe* the new promotion," he said. He brought his hand out of his case. In it was a human skull.

"Beats the hell out of pens, huh?" he said, and placed the skull carefully on Winkelstein's desk. "For one of our best customers," he said. "Careful. The jaw is loose."

Winkelstein picked up the skull and looked at it in amazement. It grinned at him whitely. "Where do you get them?" he asked.

Bernstein shrugged. "Medical schools, I guess," he said.

"Huh," said Winkelstein. He set the skull down on his desk, then opened a drawer and put it inside. "Well, thanks," he said. "But I think I'll take it home with me tonight. Wouldn't want the patients to see it."

Bernstein gave a laugh as Winkelstein put the skull into his drawer. "Yeah," he said. "Wouldn't want them to think you've been taking souvenirs from former case studies, would you?"

9.

Dr. Trilling, signing his authorizations, was humming in his office high above the world. Dr. Winkelstein gets his initial ten grand for the Tynadette study. Dr. Amardas Singh of Chamba gets his intial three grand for his birth control study. Wherever Chamba is, Trilling thought, they probably need birth control. Dr. José Martín Rodriguez y Saavedra in Buenos Aires gets four grand on completion of his new serum study. Good boy, José. Third World doctors, Trilling thought, seem to come cheaper, but there were always certain risks. All the studies in Salvador had been canceled.

His intercom lit up and buzzed imperiously. He regretted leaving his signing of the vouchers — ever since he'd taken the Oronidol, he found it fascinating to think of all the strange places he was sending Tempel's money to — but he recognized the sound of duty when he heard it. "Buzz buzz buzz," he said absently, and then picked up the phone. He cleared his throat to make his voice seem deep and grave.

"Trilling here," he said.

"Dr. Trilling, this is Jeanie." Trilling spent a long moment trying to remember who Jeanie might be. Ah, yes, his new secretary, just sent from

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the temporary agency. Tempel used a lot of temporaries, since that meant they didn't have to pay the unemployment, insurance, or benefits. Which, of course, meant more money floating around the world for the important things.

This one was about thirty. Kind of bony and flat-chested, to his way of thinking, big cornflower-blue eyes under thick glasses. She spoke with a western accent that Trilling, without any evidence, assumed was Texan. Her brown hair was in a style that had become popular with a lot of white girls these days, long strands down the nape of her neck but short and brushy everywhere else. When she'd been introduced to him, she'd worn three sets of leg warmers under her skirt. She'd been wearing cowboy boots when she came into the office, before switching to the heels she wore at her desk. Trilling was glad that thin, tall heels had come back into style. Her legs were good.

"What is it, Jeanie?" His telephone voice was good, he thought. It was a voice that belonged to a kindly and responsible doctor.

"The mail's just come in. There's a letter here I'm not sure I know what to do with. It's from the FDA."

Trilling felt a very active centipede crawl madly up and down his spine. "Why don't you ask Natalia about it?" he said.

"She's on her lunch break."

"Oh," he said. "Is it lunchtime already?" Good old Oronidol.

But the FDA — oh, damn. He wasn't in shape to deal with the FDA today. "Better bring it in," he said.

Jeanie was wearing her leg warmers pulled over her bare feet and was carrying a cup of coffee in her free hand. She put the letter on his desk. "It's about some kind of heart medication called TriPhiloden," she said. "They say it's been mass-marketed by Tempel since 1977, and we still haven't submitted our twenty-five follow-up case reports to qualify for full approval. The FDA is wondering where the reports are."

TriPhiloden? Trilling's memory trundled vaguely over his internal index. "Oh," he said. "I remember that stuff now. Isn't there a file?"

Jeanie was patient. "I don't know where the file is. I'll ask Natalia when she comes back."

"I don't think we have the case studies up here," Trilling said. "I think all the follow-up reports are in another department, or two other departments, or somewhere. Word processing and the TriPhiloden consultants should have them. I suppose the failures have held up the processing."

"Failures?" Jeanie asked.

"Yes. Patient failures. We have a lot of delays when they keep dying like that."

In the sudden thunderous silence, Trilling had the suspicion that perhaps he'd said something wrong. Panic

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thrashed in him like a floundering eel. He looked up into Jeanie's wide blue eyes. "It happens all the time," he said. "Heart patients, you know. They're not well people."

"I guess not." Then: "Failure?"

"The FDA," Trilling mused. "Look. If they call, I'm not in. I have to think about this."

Jeanie nodded briskly. Dr. Trilling realized he was overreacting to the whole situation and cursed the Oronidol he'd taken. It was good for plodding through a lot of detail work, but it was hopeless in dealing with a crisis. Dicryptomine, he thought. It would stimulate production of acetylcholine and other neurotransmitters and help him think. But it tended to put a nasty edge to reality, so he'd take some Shacocacine to help smooth things out and let him suppress his panic reaction.

"Oh," said Jeanie. "Would you like some?" It took Dr. Trilling some seconds to realize that he'd been staring abstractedly at Jeanie's coffee cup, and that she'd misinterpreted.

"Oh, no," he said. "Thanks anyway. I don't use caffeine. I think it's bad for me." He frowned down at her hose-covered toes peeking from the bulky layered leg warmers that obscured the shape of her calves. "You have good legs," he said. "Why do you wear those things?"

"Because it's cold out in my office. There are a lot of drafts blowing around this glass box. And because it's cold outside, especially on the subway platforms."

"Oh. Subways. Right." Funny, he'd almost forgotten the subways existed. He always took taxis or a company car, and sometimes — not often enough — the Tempel limo.

"Well, thank you, Jeanie," he said. "Uh, I think you should call these people I'm checking off in the directory. First find out where the follow-ups are, then find out how soon they'll be ready. Tell them it's a rush and to hire however many people they need to finish in a reasonable amount of time. And when you've found out where the reports are, tell me and I'll call them myself, sort of let them know Daddy cares."

She walked out of the office in a blaze of warm colors. Trilling thought about the FDA and their annoying insistence that he read hundreds of boring follow-ups, and then with an angry motion, he opened his drawer. With the blind petulance of the inanimate, it parted company from the desk and spilled the hundreds of little pills and capsules all over his carpet.

"Ooohh...." Trilling moaned softly. He got down on his knees and began methodically to put them back in their little plastic bottles. The red pills and the white pills and the blue pills, all the patriot colors ... they could sort of look like a flag if he moved them around and put this red one here and the blue one over there....

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It was *very* hard to stay optimistic under these conditions, he thought. No choice but to soldier on.

... and the black pills and the blue pills with the yellow stripes and the *other* yellow pills....

10.

Replace the first paragraph in the ADVERSE REACTIONS section with the following:

The following adverse reactions have been reported since the drug was marketed. A probability has been shown to exist between Riderophan and these adverse reactions. The adverse reactions that have been observed encompass observations for 2,722 patients, including 381 observed for at least 52 weeks....

11.

Dr. Winkelstein peered with frowning attention into Mrs. Kane's private parts. "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus," Mrs. Kane moaned. "Oh fuck, oh Jesus." She was thrashing around considerably, and Winkelstein found it hard to concentrate. Shut up, you silly woman, he thought, and jabbed her very precisely with his curette. Mrs. Kane gave a sudden strangled yelp.

"Try not to move so much, Mrs. Kane," he said. "You might hurt yourself."

"Careful now," the nurse said automatically. She was frowning at her nails. "It'll be over soon."

"Sonofabitch shit oh fuck," said Norma Kane. But she stopped thrashing.

Winkelstein finished cutting his tissue sample from Mrs. Kane's uterus and dropped the bloody tidbit of flesh into his clear plastic specimen container that his nurse had labeled. He put the cap on it, left the room, gave it to the lab assistant, and then returned to Mrs. Kane.

"You're doing fine, Mrs. Kane," he said.

"Jesus God Almighty," she said. Her forehead was spangled with sweat.

He removed the speculum, trying not to pay attention to his patient's occasional groans. Norma Kane, he knew, was a perfect subject for the Tynadette study. She was a fifty-eight-year-old black woman with graying hair and good health. Two grown children, one in the navy and the other in school somewhere in Tennesse. Menopause confirmed for at least three years, but still subject to hot flashes as well as vaginal atrophy: she was thus good for both the Baum study and the Tempel group. She was a widow who lived on a small pension and had a hard time meeting her medical bills. It hadn't been hard to find her: he'd just had the office staff look through his records and call anyone who was currently employing his prescription for hormones.

Winkelstein thought he'd give her

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the new pills right away; if anything contraindicative came up from the lab, he'd call her and tell her to cancel.

He straightened and took off his gloves. "There," he said. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"That sin of Eve must have been some sin," breathed Mrs. Kane as she sat up.

"Some people think so," Winkelstein answered remotely. His mind was already on his next patient, Mae Nare. She was white, poor, married to a husband who was in prison for theft, had four teenaged kids, and lived on welfare. Another perfect subject for his study.

12.

Well, thought Jeanie McGovern. So this is how some people live.

It was National Secretaries' Week, which meant that all the secretaries received nice bowls of flowers for their desks and got a free lunch from Tempel in the Executive Club that occupied the top floor of the Tempel International Building in Manhattan. The booths were padded with tooled red leather, and the glass-and-chrome tables gleamed with white tablecloths. Quite a change from the employees' cafeteria on the second floor. It was nice of Trilling — or more likely Natalia — to see that she was included.

Free food, Jeanie thought, has no calories. She ordered lobster and a margarita.

"And coffee," she said. "With lots of cream."

Trilling ordered mineral water and a cottage cheese salad. He had taken Dicryptomine and Paradol for the combined effects of lunch table wit and a sunny personality, but unfortunately, Paradol had as its major side effect the supression of appetite. "They have a gym on the floor below," he said. "I have an appointment with Dr. Kaplan to work out and then play squash every night after work. That gives time for the rush hour to end before I head back home."

"Where's that?" Jeanie said.

"Hempstead. It's a long commute," he said.

"Your wife must never see you."

"We play tennis on weekends," Trilling said. The waiter came with Jeanie's coffee.

"Just leave the pot," she said. He lowered it expressionlessly to the table.

"Your margarita will be right up, Miss," he said.

"You drink a lot of coffee, don't you?" Trilling said.

"I have to keep alive somehow. Margaritas help, too."

"I like white wine sometimes," Trilling said. "I don't drink much alcohol."

"You," said Jeanie, "don't need to."

Trilling pondered the manifold implications of this remark for a short

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moment. The margarita made its appearance: Jeanie smiled gratefully and drank about a third of it at a gulp.

Temporaries were so *different* from regular employees, Trilling thought. They were outside the structure of the corporate authority, and as a result were free of the usual office games. Sometimes it made them interesting. The rest of the time, they were simply annoying.

Jeanie sat back in the padded booth and smiled. She had a broad mouth and a lot of white teeth. "I'm a dancer," she said. "That's why I'm working temp. My company folded, since we were new, and after the cutbacks, all the art money is going to the rich, established groups — you know, the ones who already have money. I still take class every night."

"You're doing a very good job here," said Trilling. "You've picked up Tempel's way of doing things remarkably well." He wondered how long a thirty-year-old dancer had left.

"Thank you. I try."

"Where do you live?"

"Downtown. Lower East Side," said Jeanie. She gulped some more margarita.

"Oh. Isn't that dangerous?" Trilling's views of the Lower East Side came mainly from the eleven o'clock news, lots of dying people lying in alleys, all in the hard, lurid colors of night video.

Jeanie shrugged. "It's kind of like range war," she said. "There are a lot of rich people moving in now, taking over from the ethnics and the junkies and winos and artists. I'm kind of hoping the winos hang on — it's the only part of Manhattan where I can afford to live." She gave a low laugh. "I can protect myself, though," she said.

With a sudden grin, she unbuttoned the blue jacket she was wearing and showed him the gleaming butt of an automatic pistol tucked snugly in her armpit. The leather holster seemed to be approximately the size of the state of Colorado, and it was polished with use. Dr. Trilling felt sudden terror bleating shrilly in the hollows of his chest.

"Please put that away," he said. She closed her jacket, finished her margarita, and looked for the waiter.

"Don't worry. I got a permit after my apartment was broken into for the fifth time," Jeanie said. She never understood why New Yorkers, who were so often tough-minded people, felt so terrified of guns. Damned if she was going to be one of those herd animals, always bleating about their problems to an authority that never cared. By the time a Montana girl got out of high school, she knew how to take care of herself.

"Isn't that thing a little big for you?" Trilling asked. Maybe he'd order a margarita for himself.

"No. The only problem is learning how to correct your aim after the recoil. It's my daddy's .45, and it jumps like crazy unless you know how to

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control it. He added a custom grip and competition sights, and when I can afford the ammunition, I go down to the gun club and practice my quick draw." She patted the thing under her armpit. "I keep my jacket unbuttoned all the time when I'm outside in the weather. You never know."

You sure as hell don't, thought Trilling. If he had known this, he would have taken Shacocacine.

My God, he thought, how can people live like this?

13.

Bennie Lovett hawked and spat into the sink, his phlegm having that lovely speedball aftertaste that promised cool excitement in his brain. He turned to look at the skulls sitting in the acid bath in his tub and grinned. More money tomorrow. This little sideline was turning out all right.

The acid was making a mess out of the chipped porcelain of the bathtub, not to mention the iron underneath it, but Bennie didn't much care. The tub was propped up on two-by-fours to keep it from crashing through the floor into the apartment below — the building was rent-controlled, and the landlord never bothered to maintain it. If he had to replace the bathtub, serve him right. Bennie hadn't taken a bath in weeks anyway.

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14.

Write "See Supplement B" alongside the product heading.

Warning: Serious and fatal blood dyscrasias are known to occur after the administration of Moxalinophene. These include thrombocytopenia and aplastic anemia. Blood dyscrasias have been known to occur after both short-term and prolonged use of the drug.

15.

Angel Hernandez stepped into his kitchen, patted Filomena affectionately on her behind, and put five-sixths of his Rolling Rock in the shaky refrigerator. He opened the other sixth and took a swallow. Filomena was listening to the radio — it had to be one of the college stations since it was playing Latin music — and dancing as she moved about the kitchen. He grinned.

"You feel better?" he asked.

"I don't feel that arthritis in my hips," she said. "Not since Mass on Sunday."

Angel put his arms around her. "*Mi señora,* you're looking better, too." He began to dance with her to the salsa coming from WKCR.

She *was* looking better. The darkness under her eyes was fading, and her skin seemed much fresher. Her ass wasn't so soft, either.

"It's having you around the house," she said, "and you being so good to me."

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He felt a short throb of sadness at the reminder of his unemployed status, and he kissed her carefully on her forehead. "Hey," he said in wonder, running his hand through her hair. "Your hair's coming in black again."

16.

Static was joining the Vidiots in her left ear. Kimberlee Winkelstein tapped the earpiece of her Walkman, bone conduction producing a strange sound. The static continued. She looked up, frowning, through the reception room window at the motley group of patients in the Health Group waiting area, and then returned to her typewriter. She was losing interest in the Vidiots anyway — who could retain respect for a band that played the Bottom Line and whose lead was becoming a movie star? They were getting old....

She was spending the summer doing the paper work for her father's programs in Experimental Drugs. It had sounded interesting at first, but the whole experience had turned out to be awful. The job was in Brooklyn, for God's sake, not even in the city. And since she'd started working, she hadn't seen anything but sick people. Several pairs of eyes looked dully back at her. How could people live like that?

Oh, well. She would be working only until they went to Maine on vacation in August.

Patient failed 5-1-83, she typed carefully. *Physician attending reported there was no connection between patient's failure and Simulene.*

She detached the defective phones from her ears and looked up at Martha, the middle-aged black woman who ran the clerical staff of the Health Group. "What does it mean when it says that the patient failed?" she asked.

"It mean they dead," said Martha.

"Oh. Thanks." *Everything* here was depressing. Maybe tomorrow she'd bring some of her father's vodka in her pocketbook and try to make things better.

17.

Dr. Trilling's relaxed voice sounded in Jeanie's ear as she typed. "Make sure you stamp CONFIDENTIAL on this," he said for the second time. She took her foot off the Dictaphone pedal, adjusted her earphones, took a sip of coffee, and wondered for a moment why Dr. Trilling always seemed so anxious about things. Then she lit a cigarette and went back to her work.

"Recently," Trilling said, "I have received several inquiries about bleeding associated with use of the fourth-generation cephalosporins. Until now we've assumed that all bleeding that did occur was related to hypoprothrombinemia secondary to de-

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pletion of vitamin K. This seems to be in error."

Jeanie's fingers followed Trilling's words nimbly over the keyboard. "Recent reports, however, demonstrate bleeding due to alteration of prothrombin time. These reports usually involve elderly or debilitated profiles with deficient stores of vitamin K. Marked reversal of hypoprothrombinemia is demonstrated by prompt administration of vitamin K."

Jeanie had heard of vitamin K — dancers know a lot about vitamins — but hypoprothrombinemia was new. She decided to look it up in the medical encyclopedia when she got time, after she typed a new version of her résumé. There was nothing like a new job to increase one's knowledge.

18.

Norma Kane balanced her bags of groceries carefully against the wall, took her keys out of her pocketbook, and unlocked the three locks on her door. She maneuvered herself and her bags inside, closed the door with a nudge of her foot, and put the bags on the sideboard.

She dusted her hands and turned back to the door to lock it. A few months ago, she would have been out of breath after that three-flight climb. She seemed to be feeling better lately, and the friends she met for regular games of bid whist were complimenting her on her looks. Her hair was even coming in black again.

There was a bid whist party again tonight at Serene's apartment, and Norma began washing potatoes so that she could bring some potato salad. Even the wrinkles around her knuckles were smoothing out. "You have the hands of a babychild, Norma," old Carey had said the other night. The odd thing was, she didn't used to have.

She put the potatoes on to boil and walked to the toilet. "Oh, lord," she said softly, discovering that the source of the slight feeling of abdominal pressure wasn't from her bladder.

Damned if it wasn't the Curse of Eve. It was the first time in almost two years, and she'd thought she'd long been done with it. She sighed and began to wonder if she had any sanitary napkins left.

Strange, though, that it had come so easy. A few years ago, the cramps would have driven her half-crazy. Well. Another strange miracle.

She heard the potatoes boiling in the kitchen. It was time to turn the gas down so they wouldn't boil over. She began to wonder seriously about the sanitary napkin supply.

19.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Nare," Winkelstein said. "It turns out you're right."

"God damn it, I knew it," said Mae Nare. She was a thin and perpetually

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angry woman of fifty-five, and when Winkelstein had first enrolled her in the Temple and Baum Company studies, she had worn a ton of makeup and a blonde wig. Now the cosmetic layer was thinner, revealing a smoother complexion, and the hair was short but genuinely blonde and abundant. Heavy copper earrings brushed her shoulders when she turned her head. As she looked at Winkelstein, her thin lips became thinner.

"Look," she said. "You've got to do something about it. When my husband gets out of prison, he'll kill me."

"We'll arrange an abortion," Winkelstein said. This sometimes happened with the birth control studies; it was an unfortunate but necessary expense. "At no cost to you. The program will pay for it."

"It damn well better," said Mrs. Nare. She gave a short bark of a laugh. "Hey," she said. "I ain't even had my *period* for a year. Who'd of thought this would happen?"

"We'll switch your medication," Winkelstein said. "I'll write you a new prescription."

Abortions, he thought. Arranging them seemed to be half his life. It occured to him that once upon a time, when he was young and in medical school, he hadn't even believed in them, had supported the laws that made them criminal. He remembered making a speech to a friend about the value of continence and self-discipline. He had, of course, been a virgin then.

20.

A disc jockey made a joke in stereo about a sweet strawberry-flavored drink spiked with vodka, and Kimberlee wondered if he'd been paid to mention the stuff on the air. She had once tried the stuff and thought it was O.K., sort of like a watery milkshake that got you high, but she preferred her vodka straight.

Patient gravida, she wrote, *left study 7-8-83.*

She wondered briefly what "gravida" meant. She seemed to be writing that word a lot lately.

21.

Write "See Supplement B" alongside product heading. Delete the first paragraph of the WARNINGS section and replace with the following:

Warning: The prolonged administration of Simulene often leads to the development of a positive antinuclear antibody (ANA) test. If a positive ANA titer develops, the benefit/risk ratio related to continued Simulene therapy should be assessed.

22.

There was a liquid sadness in Angel Hernandez's eyes. Filomena looked down at her little feet with their bright red toenails. She was with-

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drawn again. Recently, during her monthly examinations, she had been livelier, more conversational, and Winkelstein had noticed she'd been losing weight steadily and picking up body and skin tone as if she were exercising regularly.

"I'm afraid I've bad news," Winkelstein said. He spoke to the husband; he was the only one who seemed to be taking an interest. "Mrs. Hernandez is pregnant. Five, six weeks."

"Doc," he said. "How can that happen?"

The usual way, of course, Winkelstein thought, but didn't say it. Things were going sadly awry with the Tynadette patients and The Baum Company study groups. Of the eighteen women who overlapped in the two studies, Mrs. Hernandez was the seventh to have become pregnant. In each case, menopause had been well advanced, and pregnancy was not to be suspected.

Which of the drugs was causing it? Winkelstein wondered. Now he didn't have his twenty-five usable case studies for *either* drug. He was seriously considering cutting his losses and withdrawing from both programs.

"Any treatment Mrs. Hernandez requires will continue to be without charge, Mr. Hernandez," Winkelstein said. "I think it would be best if we can arrange an abortion sometime soon."

"Dr. Winkelstein, we're *Catholics,*" said Filomena Hernandez. It was the first time she'd spoken; the hoarse wail was forced up from deep inside her. Winkelstein steepled his fingertips and spoke quickly.

"Mrs. Hernandez is over fifty," he said. "She's overweight, and her last pregnancies had complications. I think it could be dangerous for her to bring a pregnancy to term, and in the case of danger to the mother, the church will sanction the termination of the pregnancy. I can give you the name of a priest who will speak to you about it, if you like. I don't think the church will give us any objections."

As long, Winkelstein thought, as she talks to a priest from *my* neighborhood. Bigoted old priests who got stuck in poor parishes might well be another matter. In these things, as in everything else, much depended on whom you knew.

There was no hope in Angel Hernandez's solemn eyes; he had clearly resigned himself to Winkelstein, the church, and fate. "Do what you can, Doc," he said.

23.

Jeanie McGovern pulled on her cigarette and frowned at the collection of Form 1639 Drug Experimental Reports filed by Dr. Winkelstein. They were badly typed and featured a lot of correction fluid, but their impact was clear. Of the thirty women in the Tynadette study, all of whom had con-

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firmed menopause, seven had become pregnant. There was something strange going on here; she'd been working on and off for Trilling for some time now, and there'd never been a case like this before. There was something about it she couldn't put her finger on.

She picked up the telephone and buzzed Trilling's number. He was a long time picking up.

"I've been reviewing the Tynadette file," she said. "I think I've found something strange." His pause before acknowledging was a long one, and she used the time to stub out her cigarette.

"Yes," he said finally. There was a halfhearted question in his tone.

"Seven women out of thirty have become pregnant," Jeanie said. "After using a drug supposed to relieve vaginal atrophy following menopause."

There was another thoughtful pause. "I suppose I'd better see the profiles," he said.

She gathered the forms from her desk, put them back in the folder, and entered his office. Trilling was staring with an uninterested expression at the office building opposite his window. Outside, the forty-story glass cube across the street was reflecting the frantic lights of a blocked fire engine. There was no sound: high in the Tempel Building, they were insulated from the siren.

"Do you suppose," Jeanie said, "that Tynadette could be used as a fertility drug?"

Trilling pursed his lip, his eyes never wavering from the window. "Tempel has fertility drugs already," he said. The red reflection slowly flashed away, the traffic flow suddenly unclogged. "I don't understand this. I suppose I should call Winkelstein and see if he had them on any other kind of medication. Maybe he misinterpreted the profile."

"I should think," Jeanie said, "that Tempel would want to discover the cause of this. Something that makes menopausal women fertile could be useful. This might help a new line of research."

Trilling gave her an irritated glance. "What this *is* is a pain," he said suddenly. He straightened in his chair and reached for the telephone. "What it *is* is a messed-up study and letters from the FDA and great big WARNING boxes in the PDR." And having unpleasant conversations that interfere with a man's optimism, he almost added.

"Let me know what you find out," Jeanie said. "I'm interested."

Trilling gave a savage nod, and she knew she was dismissed. She wanted to ask him to discover how many of the other women in the study were suddenly fertile, but he gave her another annoyed look as he began flipping through his Rolodex. He had put on a doctor-knows-best face, and she knew it wasn't the time.

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Later, she thought. It would give her time to think about it, and the papers would cross her desk anyway.

24.

Should it become necessary to terminate the project prior to completion, the following financial arrangement is hereby agreed upon: *Investigator receives payment pro-rated according to completed case reports:*

$1,200 for each completed evaluable case.

$300 for each completed nonevaluable.

25.

Jeanie had taken class, and the whirlpool and sauna at a health club afterward — one of her friends had given her a guest pass — had left her with a pleasant, warm feeling oozing over her limbs. She hadn't met any hustlers or crazy people on the way home, and that was cause for celebration, too. She thought it would be nice to crawl into bed and drink a few margaritas while reading the new Crumley; but she couldn't afford margarita fixings and so decided to settle for killing half the bottle of California red that was sitting in the refrigerator.

She unlocked her apartment building street door and saw, slumped in the doorway, the present girlfriend of Joe Voss, the Vidiot who lived upstairs. Her name, Jeanie thought, was Angela. She looked up at Jeanie. "The club where I dance fired me 'cause I got all skinned up in a fight. And now *he's* thrown me out." She pointed with her bruised chin upstairs. "He's taking back his wife 'cause she got her old job back. Well, maybe she'll get beat up again and *I* can come back."

Well. One pleasant, dreamy mood smashed to hell. Jeanie made some consoling remarks about men in general and then climbed the two flights of stairs to get to her apartment. She opened the three locks on her door, pushed it open, and saw a ruin.

Part of the ceiling had caved in, and something vast and white had fallen onto her bathtub and broken the welds that held it together, shattering it. There was foul-smelling water all over the place, and her belongings, including a lot of books she had piled up on the floor, were slowly soaking the stuff up.

Anger blew through her like Krakatau saying hello to the record books. She leaped across her small kitchen to the refrigerator, behind which she'd hidden her gun, and reached back to seize the weapon. She didn't wear the holster in the summertime, or to class ever; and she had been afraid the gun would have been stolen. It was her only remaining valuable possession.

Then, still shaking with fury, she surveyed the damage. The damned rotten ceiling had collapsed, drop-

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ping the bathtub that belonged to the junkie upstairs onto her own. Fortunately the bathtub, like hers, was not directly connected to any plumbing except the drain, which had torn out, dripping some awful slime down her walls. No heavy water damage, anyway.

Rotten floors made rotten ceilings, and it all made for a rotten life. The hell with this city, anyway. But what was making that awful smell? She moved closer to the bathtub and peered inside it. Three skulls, still dripping flesh and hair, grinned back at her.

There was the sound of a footstep behind her, and she turned and fired.

The skinny junkie from upstairs had just come out of her bathroom, where he'd evidently been washing another skull. He looked dazed, hardly able to keep his eyes open. He carried the dripping skull in his hand.

Screaming, Jeanie unzipped him with four neatly spaced shots between larynx and sternum. In the sudden silence broken only by the sound of her brass rolling on the floor, Jeanie thought with surprising clarity. She'd tell the police that he had stolen her gun, that he'd threatened her with it and grabbed for her, and she'd wrestled the gun away from him and fired. He sure as hell would have grabbed her sooner or later, anyway.

She went to the phone, dialed 911, and told the cops to come. There were a dozen neighbors clustered in her doorway, including Joe Voss and his once and future lover, both staring at the mess with dull junkie eyes. Jeanie tried and failed to chase them away. That was a comforting thing about poor neighborhoods, she thought: everything was everyone else's business. In a newly gentrified neighborhood, her fellow tenants would probably have made sure their doors were locked and then put pillows over their ears.

She went into her bedroom alcove and lay down, drawing up her booted feet on the bed, and waited. She wondered what a ranch girl from Montana was doing in this crazy place anyway, and she thought hard about the long valleys filled with sagebrush scrub and the timbered highlands that gave a view of the wine-dark Rockies all far away. Tears stung her eyes. Damn, she thought, how can people live like this?

The first cop stepped into the apartment, treading cautiously as if walking on ice. She looked up from her pillow and answered her own question. "Gotta dance," she said. The policeman gave no indication he thought her remark was odd.

26.

It took a couple days for Trilling to get used to the idea of a killer working in his office. He'd seen Bennie toes-up on the eleven o'clock news, with a bloody sheet over him, all in

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mute hideous color, and a morbid closeup of a cardboard box full of skulls. The tabloids had been featuring vast headlines, all screaming adjectives, about the East Side Addict Grave Robber, and Trilling had been forced to stare at them as they were upheld by other passengers on the long commute to Hempstead. It was all nightmarish.

Jeanie had been out for several days following the incident, though, and by the time she got back, Trilling had got used to the idea. He took some Pandrocene for a kind of calm gravity and ordered an extravagant bouquet of flowers for her desk. He wanted to be on hand when she arrived. She seemed a little pale, and he gave her a paternal hug.

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said.

He nodded. "Of course you don't," he said. He began fumbling in his pocket for one of his pill bottles. Perhaps she'd like a capsule or two.

Jeanie looked at her desk and saw the flowers. "Oh," she said. "They're pretty, aren't they?"

Trilling nodded and tried to smile in an encouraging way. "Thank you," said Jeanie, and sat down at her desk.

Well, Trilling thought. Things back to normal so quickly. Repressing the impulse to dust off his hands, he gave everyone in the office a sunny smile and returned to his desk.

Jeanie went straight to work, trying to ignore the solemn, inadvertent, stares of her fellow workers as they walked past her alcove. She really didn't want to talk about it. It seemed that talk was all she'd done for days.

She'd spent the first night in jail, until her phone calls had got through to a lawyer she had once worked for. He'd come down and got her out, but that wasn't the end of it.

There was a very good chance she'd end up charged with murder. She had listened in amazement as her lawyer explained the facts.

"You were supposed to find out his intentions, Jeanie," he'd said. "You were supposed to ask him what he was doing in your apartment. If he was there to rob you, you should have let him. If he was there to rape you, you were justified in holding him at gunpoint or subduing him, but never shooting to kill. Only if he had expressed his intention to murder you were you justified in killing him. And even then the precedents aren't unanimous."

"But he had a *gun,*" Jeanie had told him. "And a *skull.*"

"Doesn't make any difference," the attorney said. "You've been watching too many Charles Bronson movies. Bronson never gets booked for murder, but that's just Hollywood. Here in reality, things are different."

And so the police investigation was continuing. Her friends and the personnel at the gun club were being interviewed by detectives. Even if no charges were eventually laid — and

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that was up to the district attorney, not the cops — there would be depositions to be given and appearances to be made, and for all of that she'd need a lawyer who was charging her five hundred an hour. Reporters from the tabloids were staking out her apartment in hopes she'd let something slip, and on top of everything, someone had broken into her apartment when she was in jail and cleaned everything out.

Even if she wanted to leave the city, she couldn't: the police had told her to stay in their jurisdiction, and besides, she couldn't afford to move. She'd had to return to Tempel, if only to pay her bills.

How can people live this way? she thought.

Late the next day, Jeanie was on the Dictaphone and realized that the letter she was typing canceled the Tynadette study. She took her foot off the pedal, pulled off her earphones, and lit a cigarette, trying to understand what was gnawing at her mind. Whatever it was, it wouldn't come.

Hell, she decided. I've got my own problems.

She put her foot down on the pedal and began to type.

27.

Kimberlee Winkelstein typed her father's name and office address across the Tempel Request for Check form. *Program terminated,* she typed, *9-12-84.* She had to go to the correction fluid and retype the correct year. She'd had a little too much vodka during the break.

It was the second program termination in a week. The first had been The Baum Company study. Her father had been upset about it, but he'd now received approval to test new medications for both companies, different medications that were supposed to do the same thing without the side effects that had snarled up the programs. So he'd get his money anyway.

She'd forgotten her Walkman today, and glanced up in annoyance at the sounds of the children jumping up and down on the waiting room seats. Old people and young mothers and children, all sick with something. She wished she could cover up the noise with her bootleg cassette of the Headlickers. They were beginning to replace the Vidiots in her affections.

28.

PARANOID DISORDERS (Definitions for basis of treatment):

1. Paranoia
2. Shared paranoia (folie à deux)
3. Acute paranoid disorder
4. Atypical paranoid disorder

29.

Angel Hernandez sipped on his fourth beer of the afternoon and

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watched the television without interest as it showed an Argentine soap opera. Filomena moved slowly about the living room, picking up the children's toys. Since the abortion she'd been a lot less lively, and in the past few days, she'd been complaining that her arthritis was coming back. She came to the sports section of yesterday's *Post* and held it up mutely.

"I picked my horses," he said. "You can throw it away. How about a kiss?"

She gave a faint smile and bent over him for a peck. She seemed out of breath with the exertion, and in the instant before she straightened, he noticed sadly that her hair was coming in white again.

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With "The Last" James Patrick Kelly, a frequent contributor to F&SF, gives us an eerie and distinctive tale of a small town invaded by hoodlums, a family curse, and a woman who is the last of her line. After reading "The Last" you may want to keep an eye on the graffiti in your town.

The Last

BY

JAMES PATRICK KELLY

Hester was the last of the Pickworths. Carrying the old name was at once a distinction and a curse. As a young woman she had always dreamed of escaping the town that her great-great-great-grandfather had founded. Fifty-one years in Pickworth, New Hampshire, had taught Hester Pickworth that dreams never come true.

She was not a lonely woman. In the summer the front porch of the historic Pickworth Garrison was a gathering place for the town's elders. Some nights, though, the chatter of her fossilized neighbors was so unbearable that she retreated to a fantasy world where she alone was real. She worried that boredom was driving her crazy.

She was picking Shasta daisies in her front garden when the Major doddered around the corner. There was no one in town older than Maj. Harcourt LeFebre, U.S. Army (ret.), and thus he was the current holder of Mesech's Rod. Since the French and Indian War this silver-headed cane had circulated through the town, sole property of the eldest citizen. The Major was using it to bat away loose bits of pavement as he shuffled toward Hester's porch.

Watching him, Hester felt a odd tingling in her fingertips, as if someone were drawing a pinpoint across the loops and whorls. The Major wavered like a mirage in the heat of the July evening. Hester shivered. A distant roar grew steadily louder. She stepped into the street. The major tipped his hat to her.

An enormous man, perhaps the biggest human Hester had ever seen, came hurtling down Beamish Hill on a motorcycle. He was at least seven-

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feet tall. She thought he might be Hispanic, or maybe American Indian. On his sweat-soaked football jersey was printed:

Los Muertos
25

He swerved across the street and accelerated toward the Major.

"Watch out!" Hester sprinted toward the old man.

The Major had paused to admire Hester's perennials. He froze when he saw the oncoming motorcycle. She reached him a few seconds before the madman, blocked the Major into a bed of spiderwort, and dived after him. No. 25 sped toward Center Pickworth without looking back.

"You spermbrained goon!" The Major jumped up with a spryness that belied his eighty-nine years. "Even Pickworth isn't safe anymore from these goddamned hoodlums." He kneaded his ribs and grimaced. "I believe you would have made a fine linebacker, Hester Pickworth."

While the Major settled himself with three fingers of scotch from his hip flask, the regulars arrived. First came the Bakers, the formidable Ida leading, her husband, Fred, bobbing along behind like a dinghy on a towline.

"I brought you some zucchini bread," said Ida, unburdening herself of a foil-wrapped brick.

"Not for me," said the Major, swirling whiskey in a paper cup. "Reaper had one chance at me today. No sense giving him another." Ignoring Ida's glare, he snagged her rudderless husband and launched into a recounting of his confrontation with No. 25.

The Reverend Mr. Lessard drove up with Anna and the Minicis. Then came Old Man Troudt. For a change, Hester's shadow, Alma DeGenaro, was the last to climb the creaking steps.

"Next time I see that jerk . . ." Well lubricated by now, the Major swung his cane over his head. ". . . I'll give him this." he lunged forward. "Ha! Right between the spokes. Be in Vermont by the time he comes down."

"You'll do no such thing," said the Reverend Mr. Lessard, who was a gold star fool. "That cane is an antique. Part of our heritage. A treasure that belongs to the town, not to you."

The Major rolled his eyes toward heaven and General MacArthur, and then smashed Mesech's Rod against Hester's porch rail. There was a sharp *crack* that stopped conversation. The Reverend Mr. Lessard was about to rebuke the Major for breaking the cane, then noticed that it was the two-by-six railing that had splintered.

"What's gotten into the Major tonight?"

"About six ounces of scotch. And more excitement than he's had since the Bicentennial."

"I'm telling you the Red Sox are a second-division team. No pitching, no defense. . . ."

"So then the fat guy takes out his wallet. . . ."

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All around Hester familiar conversations buzzed. She passed among her guests, trying to get rid of Ida's zucchini bread.

Fred Baker washed his second piece down with a drink from the Major's flask. "You think it was Joe that tried to run you down, Major?" His eyes had a whiskey shine.

"Joe?" said Hester.

Fred wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You weren't in town today?"

"Library's closed on Wednesdays, Fred." She shook her head. "Not that anyone would expect you to know that."

"Somebody . . ." The Major paused to clean his glasses with his shirttail. ". . . Some damned hoodlum spray-painted Broad Street last night. Graffiti. Solid from Troudt's drugstore to our candy-ass cop house. And they all say the same thing: 'JOE IS COMING.'"

"You know how hard it is to get that stuff off of brick?" Old Man Troudt wandered over.

Hester drifted in and out of conversations. She had heard them all before. Then Alma dragged her into a quiet corner. Alma's daughter had a soap opera marriage; Hester was sick of hearing about it. She veneered a sympathetic expression on her face. Soon Alma's grousing receded into a kind of unsavory daydream, and Hester escaped into her fantasy.

In the fantasy, Hester's perceptions expanded to encompass all of Pickworth. She would watch over her town like a little god. She would smell the yeasty aroma that always lingered in the Baker's kitchen. Snippets of distant arguments would come to her and she would be able to tell the exact change in the Reverend's pocket from the jingle as he walked. Tonight, however, she could not escape the confines of the Pickworth Garrison. She imagined that Fred Baker and the Major were playing gin in the parlor.

". . . and the Chief says, 'So what?'" Fred was disgusted. "'You want me to bust my budget on a case of vandalism?'"

The Major grunted.

"I hear in New York they spray-paint the cop cars."

"In this town they could spray-paint the cops, and no one would know the difference," said the Major. "Knock with three."

"You got nine."

Cards were shuffled; a new hand was dealt.

"Hear about Asa's goat?"

"Torn to pieces, they say. And those damned graffiti all over the barn." Fred's voice was husky and very low. "Keeping the twelve-gauge in the trunk. Just in case."

"A-yuh."

". . . because of her bursitis." Alma had her hand on Hester's knee;" she squeezed to make her point. "So then she says she can't give up tennis. She says that's all Ken ever wants to do,

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and if she quits, she'll never see him. I told her that all they have now are two rackets, a can of balls, and a marriage license. Can you imagine it?"

"Can't," said Hester.

Ducking under the barbed-wire fence, Hester was reminded of Gray's "Elegy." Behind her was the lowing herd: Chet Kimball's Holsteins. Ahead in the meadow that sprawled toward the Lamprey River was the Pickworth family graveyard. Its tumbledown stone walls had been breached by an onslaught of wildflowers and quack grass. She had avoided this place since the day she buried her father.

"Blessed be," said Alma as she darted between the headstones. "They're all here."

Hester gathered a handful of coreopsis and dropped them on his grave. She whispered, as if telling him a secret:

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

"Here!" cried Alma as she dropped to her knees and tore at the vines that covered an overthrown marker. "Here. Oh, I've been looking for you, Mesech Pickworth." She waggled her finger at the grave, then opened her pack and removed masking tape, a roll of bond paper, and a box of black lumber-marking crayons. "I just have to take a rubbing; look at the workmanship." Her fingers caressed the winged death's-head that topped the stone. "Did you know he corresponded with Cotton Mather?"

There were two reasons why Alma DeGenaro had volunteered to fill the long-vacant post of Pickworth's curator of cemeteries. One was that she hoped to crack the granite hearts of the town's Yankee establishment. Eight months was time enough to win a hundred friends in the teeming neighorhoods of Boston's North End; all Alma had to show for eight months in Pickworth was Hester. "Snobs!" Alma would complain to her bemused conquest. "Ancestor-worshiping snobs. But I'll show 'em. Let's see 'em snub me when I'm the one tending their stinking forefathers."

That was one reason. The other was that she wanted to raise the dead.

Alma was a witch. Not a broom-riding, crook-nosed child snatcher, but rather an initiate of a tax-exempt, air-conditioned, health-food coven. Her first exposure to the craft had come while watching the Donahue show. In the back of her recipe book, she now kept a chapter on arcana. She knew a surefire sleeping potion, a cold cure, and a love spell so potent that she was afraid to begin human

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experimentation. She had cured her nephew Sal's acne by the laying on of hands. Her goal was to raise her late husband, Phil, and inquire as to the location of their life savings. All that he had left her was the shabby little bungalow on a scummy pond in godforsaken Pickworth.

Hester endured Alma's eccentricities with a courteous skepticism. Although her religious beliefs were absurd, they had an exotic charm. One of the things that Hester liked best about Alma was that she was definitely not from Pickworth. She was what Hester had always wanted to be: a woman who had seen the world, the kind of person things happened to. Their only row had come when Alma had asked about the Squamscott Massacre and whether Goodman Mesech Pickworth had really been a wizard, as the local tales had it. The very same questions had obsessed Hester's father and finally broken him. Hester was determined to disbelieve the old stories. This was, after all, the age of space and subatomic physics — and Hester was proud to be of her time. She had a subscription to *Scientific American*; she had read Camus and Sartre in the French; she was a confirmed atheist. There was no room in her world for witchcraft.

"I'll bring my Weed Eater out here tomorrow and clean this mess up," said Alma, swiping at a spray of baby's breath. "Help me stand Mesech's stone up?"

The two women knelt side by side and, grunting, heaved the gravestone upright. Alma jerked it back and forth until it dropped into its original hole. "Blessed be!" She brushed at the clay clinging to the back of the stone, revealing three words spray-painted in black.

JOE IS HERE.

"The weeds . . . that stone has been down for months. Years." Alma's hands fluttered together in a complicated way; she muttered in a tongue that Hester did not recognize.

"What are you doing? Stop that." Hester had to restrain herself from slapping at her friend. "Stop!"

"Just a protection." Alma stood shakily. "Someone is working a spell. Right here in Pickworth."

Hester shoved the rubbing supplies at Alma and stalked off. Prattle, she told herself. Superstitious prattle.

As Hester locked up the library, she noticed a crowd gathering in the mill parking lot across the street. Shifts were changing, and Officer Wheelwright had just arrived to direct traffic. It had been on his watch on the previous night that tires all over town had been slashed, windows broken. About the same time, person or persons unknown had changed the graffiti to JOE IS HERE.

Officer Wheelwright was the ugliest man in Pickworth. His classmates and neighbors used to abuse him for his looks. Then he joined the police

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force, and war was officially declared. He was the kind of cop who wrote tickets for failure to signal for turns. He took unseemly pleasure in shutting down loud parties. He wore mirrored sunglasses.

As Hester crossed the street, the Major and several of his cronies marched out of the Boiled Lobster Pub next door.

"Come on now, Ed," Officer Wheelwright said to a red-faced stitcher. "Why don't you pack it in for the day?"

"Not until we get some answers."

The crowd rumbled its agreement.

"I gave my report to the Chief. You got questions, ask him."

"Fifteen thousand, three hundred and forty-five dollars!" cried the Major. Heads turned, the crowd parted for the holder of Mesech's Rod. "That's what we pay this stooge every year." People snickered appreciatively. "Be better off painting scary faces on all the fire hydrants."

Officer Wheelwright stiffened. Perhaps he sensed, as Hester did, that Pickworth was just a few hard words away from the first riot in its history. He backed toward his cruiser. He tried to open the door and slip inside with one fluid motion. Instead he banged his head on the top of the car and knocked his hat off.

The mob was momentarily diverted. Officer Wheelwright watched from the safety of the locked cruiser as his hat took the punishment meant for him. It sailed across the parking lot like a Frisbee, was caught and flung again. Even the Major was laughing.

"Attention!" Hester had finally pushed her way to the center of the confrontation. "Your attention, please." Her voice seemed so small, but she *was* a Pickworth. People hushed one another. "You know, it's silly to blame the police for what's happened. What we ought to do is help them catch the vandals." The silence was complete. Even Officer Wheelwright was peering through the windshield at her, listening. "For the past two nights, someone has been treating our town — us — with disrespect. I don't think we should let this person get away with three in a row."

"That's right!"

"Tell 'em, Hester."

"What do we do?"

Lord help me, thought Hester, I'm trapped in a Frank Capra movie. "What do we do?" she said. "We ought to keep Pickworth open and lit up all night. We ought to sit on our front porches and patrol our streets. Watch out for one another, that's what!"

The would-be rioters stamped and clapped and shouted their approval. Despite herself, Hester beamed at them. She had never done anything like this before, and she was exhilarated at how easy it was. She held up her hands for silence.

"One more thing," she said, nod-

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ding toward the captive policeman. "Who's got the hat?"

Later, as she was walking home, the idea of an all-night vigil seemed less than inspired. There would be too much drinking — there was always too much drinking. She thought of the shotgun in Fred Baker's trunk. Center Pickworth would be an armed camp full of swacked vigilantes. A terrible idea.

It bothered her, but what bothered her more was that for the first time in years, she felt special. The ease with which she had handled the crowd reminded her of squandered possibilities.

As a child of astonishing brilliance, Hester had hated her dreary hometown. There was no one to talk to. She thought her father must be the smartest man in Pickworth, but he was too busy drinking himself to death. Her mother was a kind but simple woman who, like her neighbors, was mired in an unexamined life. When Hester was accepted at Radcliffe, she vowed that she would return only for short and unsentimental visits.

Two months into her first semester, she had a nervous breakdown.

She told everyone that it was not because she was homesick. Nor was it because she could not do the work. She never really understood the problem; all she knew was that she felt like a stranger, immutably alien. When people in the world talked, she could barely understand them. She could never get comfortable on their couches; the smell of their food revolted her.

Her father was horrified at her illness, and yet she sensed that he had expected it. He kept a large cross-stitch sampler in his room that he had embroidered as a young man to outrage his father, her grandfather. It was a verse from *Exodus*: "For I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me." One night when he was very drunk, she got him to explain. In a slurred voice he told her his version of the Squamscott Massacre. He told her how Mesech Pickworth and the medicine man of the Squamscotts had fought a wizard's duel over the land that was to become Pickworth. How the population of an entire Indian village had disappeared one dark night. Her father told her how the great chief and sorcerer, Passaconaway, on hearing of the massacre, had cursed Pickworth and his family to remain for all time on the land they had coveted, and never again to plague the rest of the world with their magic. He told her, cackled like a madman, and then told her not to believe a word of it. Never to believe anything. He died that summer, drenched in alcohol.

That was when she built the wall within herself. On one side of the wall, she lived her everyday life of

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quiet desperation. On the other side, she kept a preposterous legend of ancient sin and eternal penance. There, too, her fantasy of special powers — in which she detected the seeds of her father's sickness.

She sometimes wondered if a husband would have made things easier. But she had yet to find a man whom she could stand to look at across breakfast. So she became a teetotaling spinster, a cliché. The Bartholomew D. Pickworth Memorial Library was her one vice. At first she took refuge in the books and dissipated much of her inheritance adding to the collection. As the years passed, however, it was the mindless drudgery that numbed her pain: the shelving, the cataloguing, the binding of wounded books.

Hester was angry with herself as she climbed to the big front porch. She could not help noticing that the bee balm was coming into bloom in the dappled shade of the willows. The prettiest garden in Pickworth, she thought, but my mind is choked with weeds. She shouldered the slowly warping front door open and saw an intruder in the parlor, staring at her family portraits.

He was a tall youth, with a thin face the color of mushrooms. He was more bone than flesh. She would have guessed that he was in his early twenties but for his eyes. He had torn her living room to pieces, and when she spoke to him, he looked right through her.

"What do you want?"

He made a sound that was perhaps intended as a laugh, perhaps a moan. He trembled like an old man with palsy.

"Get out of here." Hester took two quick steps to the wood stove and grasped a cast-iron trivet by its handle. She held it in front of her with both hands. He wobbled toward her. When she swung, he caught the blow with a forearm that was covered with needle marks. He lunged; this time the trivet struck the side of his head. He dropped like a dead man.

They seemed surprised, the waves of grim men who came to clean up after a crime. It was as if they had reserved to their sex alone the possibility of displaying grace under pressure. Nobody blamed her for braining a junkie caught in the act of burglary; they just seemed to doubt that it had actually happened. The medics who loaded him into the ambulance reassured her that concussion was the least of his problems; he was suffering from hepatitis, malnutrition, and withdrawal. Chief Silvestri asked anyone who would listen why such a man would come to Pickworth.

By dinnertime all that remained of the nightmare was a police car parked down the street. It did not make Hester feel any safer. She straightened the mess the intruder had made, and

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then rocked for a while on her porch, trying to cast her senses out into the town. All she heard were crickets and the wind. Soon the regulars would be stopping by. She decided to preempt their nosy sympathy, pulled on a sweater and walked into Center Pickworth.

She was installed in a place of high honor: the window table at the Boiled Lobster. The patrons pressed liquor on her, which she did not accept, and coffee, which she did. The men made a few cracks about how the cops should sign out the books if the librarian was going to catch the crooks, and then left her alone. She sat with Alma, Ida Baker, and Gena Minici, who were splitting a pitcher of beer. Although they were careful not to force her to participate in their nervous chatter, they wanted nothing more than to talk about the intruder.

"I say the man came here looking for trouble." Ida was indignant. "He just found more than his share."

"Been a lot of strange ones in town the last couple of days," said Gena.

"Strange?"

"People who don't belong here." Ida refilled her glass. "You know, from the city." Everybody understood the euphemism.

There was a moment of silence. Hester sipped her coffee and wondered why Alma was so subdued. She was missing the chance to impress two of the town's most influential matrons. Ida Baker had never even bothered to learn Alma's name, and now they were drinking beer from the same pitcher. Alma kept twisting the odd gold ring on her middle finger. Hester stared at it through the gloom.

Ida noticed the ring, too. "What's that?" she said, pointing.

Alma shivered. "Is it eleven yet?"

"Eleven-thirty," said Hester.

"That's a pretty charm on your ring," said Ida unpleasantly. "You get it in Boston?"

"No." Alma showed it to her. "It's an *udjat* eye."

"*Ud*-what?"

"It's the eye Horus lost while fighting the god Seth to avenge the death of Osiris." She pushed her chair away from the table. "Did you say eleven-thirty? Excuse me." She departed for the ladies' room.

"Egyptian," said Hester nervously. No one else in town knew yet that Alma considered herself a witch. "I think she said her daughter in Seattle bought it for her. At the King Tut exhibition."

"Why doesn't she wear a crucifix?" Ida sniffed in disapproval. "She's Italian, isn't she?" She summoned Fred. "Well, I think we should go home, dear. Bound to be a quiet night after what's happened."

"Too damn quiet." He seemed a little lopsided, as if all the boilermakers he had drunk had pooled on one

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side of his body. "Wish the Major was here. Liven things up."

After the Bakers left, Gena started to complain about her husband's cigars. Ten minutes passed, fifteen. Hester excused herself. The ladies' room was empty. She asked Maureen the waitress, who grimaced and nodded toward the back door.

A lone spotlight cast its harsh light into the alley. Alma had set up a Coleman stove on a waist-high stack of wooden pallets. Scattered around the stove were empty Tupperware containers. On it simmered a bouillabaisse of whole toad and baby eel and something in a covered saucepan that smelled like the effluent from a paper mill. There were tears in Alma's eyes from the stench. "What time?" she said.

"Alma!"

She took a deep breath, uncovered the saucepan, and emptied the bouillabaisse into it. "Now, where's that aspergillum?" She rummaged through the Tupperware, patted her windbreaker nervously.

"Have you lost your mind?"

"O.K." She brandished a small perforated silver ball mounted on a silver handle. "You want to help? We've got to sprinkle this brew all over town. We'll have to move fast. It loses potency after midnight." Noting Hester's incredulity, she dipped the aspergillum into the saucepan and shook it at one of the Joe's graffiti. "A spell, Hester. You fight magic with magic."

Hester shook her head. Alma shrugged and bustled down the alley alone. She was stopped short of Broad Street by the scream of an approaching siren. "Not fair. Haven't even started yet."

"It isn't the police," Hester caught up with her. "An ambulance."

They saw it race past. They heard the screech of tires. Streamers of red and yellow light skittered across the wall behind them.

"See what it is." Alma shrank back into the shadows.

Hester stepped onto the sidewalk. People were converging on the ambulance, which had parked in front of the VFW hall. The bell tower of the Congregational church began to toll the hour. Hester's fingertips prickled.

"Blessed be!" Alma stumbled away from the wall. She whipped the aspergillum at it and then pitched the contents of the saucepan. The foul brew spattered across the graffito and ran down the wall. Although the fumes made Hester's eyes water, there was no mistaking what she saw.

The words were changing.

Black letters squirmed and slithered together into a convulsing mass, like the gathering of chromosomes in some monstrous cell. Slowly the mass untangled into new letters. They writhed in place and were still. Now they seemed no more remarkable than broken bottles or scraps of newspaper.

JOE IS EVERYWHERE.

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Hester let her breath out with a shudder.

Officer Wheelwright sprinted down the street toward them. He stopped in front of Troudt's drugstore for a quick word and then continued. As he ran, he held his gun to keep the holster from slapping against his leg.

"Excuse me, Miss Pickworth." He nodded at Alma. "Chief wants everyone to go home. Now."

"What is it, Officer? What's happening?"

Officer Wheelwright wiped his brow. "The Major. He's dead."

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Headlines from the *Strafford World-Guardian,* July 9:

BURGLARY SUSPECT ESCAPES FROM PICKWORTH JAIL (p. 1)

VANDALS STRIKE AGAIN (p. 5)

ELDEST CITIZEN SUCCUMBS (p. 28)

Seeing it in print makes it seem plausible, thought Hester as she tossed the paper onto Alma's plastic-slipcovered couch. Better a screaming *Enquirer*-style banner: BLACK MAGIC GRIPS PICKWORTH! Then she could disbelieve with a clear conscience. She wandered into the kitchen to check the cuckoo clock again: 1:36. She wished Alma would wake up and drive her home. Making as much noise as she could, she put a new pot of coffee on the stove and went back to the hand of solitaire that the paperboy had interrupted.

At 2:50 Alma shuffled out of her bedroom wearing slippers and a bathrobe. "Morning."

"Afternoon."

"Can't talk until I get my coffee."

"I know. There's a fresh pot."

Alma settled onto the couch with a huge mug and the paper. "What's coronary thrombosis?" she said after a few minutes of slow reading.

"Heart attack."

"Well, he was eighty-nine." She took a sip. "Who gets Mesech's Rod?"

"Look, Alma, I'd like to get home sometime today."

"Home?" She was incredulous. "With that junkie on the loose? Don't be silly. You'll stay here."

"Thanks, but I'm going home," Hester said firmly.

Alma shrugged and put the paper down. "Not much about the graffiti."

"What did you expect? Did you report what you saw? Did I? Would anyone in their right mind?"

She nodded and drained the cup. "I'll get dressed."

Alma checked the rearview mirror as if she were driving a stolen car, and then turned off the engine. The two women sat in silence for a moment.

"Come in for some lunch?" said Hester.

Alma shivered. "Listen, Hester, I was thinking of spending a few days with some friends in Boston. Haven't

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seen them in a while, and I was wondering . . . do you want to come? You never seem to go anywhere, and you could use the rest."

"What about the library?" Hester patted her friend's hand. "Don't worry."

"'Don't worry,' she says." Alma nodded at the police car parked down the street. "Tell that to *them*." She took a deep breath. "Mesech Pickworth's gravestone was the only one vandalized. I checked."

"So?"

"The motorcycle — here. The burglar — here. You saw the graffiti change. The Major was your friend."

"Don't be silly, Alma." She opened the passenger door.

"You're a Pickworth. *The* Pickworth. If they want this town, they have to take it away from you."

Despite herself, Hester laughed. If Alma believed she was in danger, then there was nothing to worry about. "I'm sorry, but really . . . you can't be serious."

"If you won't run, then you'll have to fight; somebody has got to stop them. If you're staying, I'm staying. I want to help."

"I'm too busy living in the real world, Alma." She shut the door behind her. "Maybe you should send for the Wizard of Oz."

Actually, there was some question as to who should get Mesech's Rod. Mesech Pickworth's will was on display in the town hall. It read in part: "To my brethren and their children I leave the Rod. Let it succour the eldest denizen of my Plantation and the Lord have mercie on any other that use it." Who exactly was the eldest "denizen?" One candidate, Wesley Carr, aged eighty-six and three months, had suffered a stroke in March and was currently residing in a rest home in Dover. The other, June Boudreau, aged eighty-six and five months, flew south each fall as soon as her arthritis started acting up, and rarely returned before Memorial Day. All agreed to put the issue to the town meeting. Until then, the cane was entrusted to Hester.

The Pickworths had always been the custodians of the cane. Six times in the 320-odd years of its existence, it had been held by Pickworths. There was even a special rack for it built in the front parlor that dated back to Father Mesech's time.

The Major had an open-casket funeral; Mesech's Rod lay in his lifeless hands until the moment of the casket's closing. He was buried next to his wife. Practically the whole town turned out for the old man.

Later that same day, a smaller group of mourners gathered on Hester's porch. Some of the regulars were missing; there had been a rash of sick relatives and pressing out-of-town commitments since the crime wave washed over Pickworth. But the Bakers were there, the twitchy Reverend

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Mr. Lessard, a few others. When Alma did not appear, Hester tried to call her. The line was busy.

"Where's you friend Elmer tonight?" Ida sat next to her. "Leave town?"

"Her name is Alma."

"I just can't understand the way some people think." Ida touched the bun of hair behind her head. "I mean, if you believe in this Joe and he says he's everywhere, then why run? And if you don't, there's no reason to run. 'Course, Fred and I aren't going anywhere."

"I believe you're in the right place, Ida."

Hester watched a pair of headlights crawl down Beamish Hill. A car stopped by her front walk; the engine sputtered and died. It was a dented and rusting wreck. The right front fender was flowerpot orange; the rest of the car was black. For several minutes it just sat there. Hester could not see any passengers.

"Now who could that be?" said Ida.

The driver's door opened; out stepped a slight black man in a cream-colored suit carrying a radio the size of a weekend suitcase. Hester could just make out the glitter of gold chains around his neck. He perched on the front fender, aimed the twin speakers at the porch, and turned the sound up. It was eerie, hypnotic music. An electric synthesizer wailed like an animal caught in a steel-jaw trap. The sporadic drumming went off like gunfire. There were rhythmic shouts that Hester could not understand, but which seemed to urge forgetfulness. Oblivion.

"I saw this recipe in *Organic Gardening* for cucumber bread." Ida paid no attention to the new arrival. "I was thinking of trying it; seems we always have more cukes than we can use."

Hester glanced about her in alarm. No one seemed to notice the black man or his car. The cop parked down the street was reading the paper.

The passenger door opened. A gray lady emerged and approached the carriage lamp that lit the way to the Pickworth Garrison. At least Hester guessed it was a woman; all she could really see was a pasty face and strings of gray hair drooping from under a woolen cap. The woman wore a shabby tweed overcoat that hung to her ankles. On her feet were a child's rubber boots, unbuckled.

"You're looking poorly, dear. Do you want to lay down?"

"Oh, hush, Ida!"

A motorcycle passed the police car and stopped next to the carriage lamp. No. 25 got off.

Hester bolted from her seat. All across the porch conversations had dwindled into a vast and dreamy silence. Her guests sat and nodded and smiled at each other as the strange music roared at them. She turned to escape into the house, but the front

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door opened. The junkie came out and sat down next to the Reverend Mr. Lessard. He picked up the Reverend's limp hand, shook it, giggling, and then let it drop.

"You're Joe." Hester said to the junkie.

"There's no Joe," said the gray lady as she climbed the porch steps. "We are all Joe." No. 25 came behind her. They took their seats among her guests. "I think I could get to like it here," she said.

"What do you want?"

"You don't believe in evil, Hester Pickworth. Reason tells you that the only problems with this world are poverty, misunderstanding, and bad luck. You take a very modern view toward life, very advanced." She rocked in silence for a moment, contemplating Hester's flowers. "You want to leave this place." The gray lady pointed to the black man waiting by the car. "He can take you. Anywhere."

"I-I can't. I'll get sick."

"We can cure you." The gray lady smiled. She had bad teeth. "I offer you the world."

"No."

"All that I ask is that you do what you've always wanted. Leave Pickworth to us. No one will know the difference, believe me. Summer will come, the flowers will grow, people will gather on this porch. You are wasted here, Hester Pickworth. Join us."

"No."

No. 25 spoke for the first time. "You have a friend?"

"What?"

He took a bloodstained handkerchief from his pocket and unfolded it. Inside was a severed finger, and on the finger was a small gold ring decorated with an *udjat* eye.

Fred and Ida Baker nodded dreamily. There was ice in Hester's throat. "Alma?"

"She summoned us today," said the gray lady. "Normally we don't answer the call of fools, but in this case there was an advantage to be gained." She took the handkerchief from No. 25, removed the ring, and threw the finger into a bed of marigolds. "I could give this back to your friend if you leave. I could also send for another part. Perhaps something larger this time?"

"Damn you."

The gray lady laughed. "Yes. Oh, yes."

It's a dream, thought Hester. A vile dream. The music assaulted her. The empty smiles of her friends rattled her. She had to escape. She stumbled into the parlor, shut the door. And steadied. Perhaps it was the dour portraits hanging on the wall. Had they been tempted, too? Offered the chance of escape in return for serving the evil ones?

Hester felt the pinpoint on her fingertips. She wanted to hold something. A weapon, but not the trivet

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this time. She could not look away from the Pickworths — her father; Grandfather Jonas; Bartholomew D; and finally Mesech Pickworth himself, barely visible in the gloom of old varnish, sitting in his favorite chair with a silver-headed cane across his lap.

No. 25 kicked in the door, and the gray lady came through.

Hester scrambled across the parlor and tore Mesech's Rod from its rack. Although she had handled it before, it had never felt like this. The silver knob began to shine with a cold light, and when she touched it, she could hear every word being said in Pickworth. The din made her giddy. She felt a fire kindle in her joints. The gray lady loomed out of a blur; Hester could no longer see across the room.

"Put it away, Hester Pickworth. Or this is one dream you'll never be able to wake up from."

Hester's hands ached. She stared; they were wrinkled and shaking. The slow vise of old age was suddenly crushing her. With a strength borne of horror, she lashed out with Mesech's Rod. It sliced through the gray lady as if she were made of smoke, but where the shoulders had been there were now flames. Again Hester swung, and again. At last she collapsed, exhausted.

"I know how to wait," The flames seemed to crackle with scorn. "It won't be long."

For a long time Hester was afraid to look at anything but the grain in the oak floorboards. Eventually she drew what should have been her hand toward the bounds of this sane little world. It was an arthritic claw.

Using the silver-headed cane, she hobbled to the window. She looked out and saw her guests chatting on the porch, and beyond them the empty street.

The last of the Pickworths wept.

ADDENDUM TO SCIENCE (page 152)

Since this article was written, an even dimmer object has been detected — VB 8B. This was first announced as a "planet," but it isn't. It glows detectably. It has also been named a "brown dwarf," which I don't like for it is not brown but deep red. However, I suppose that name will live on, even though "substar" makes much more sense.

—Isaac Asimov

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THE RULE OF NUMEROUS SMALL

I frequently get letters that ask me questions under the assumption that: 1) I know everything, and 2) that I run a free information service.

Nevertheless, I answer when I can because I hate to disappoint people, especially if they're thoughtful enough to enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Notice that I say "when I can," for there are times when I know nothing about a subject, and there are other times when I do know the answer but it would take pages and pages to explain it properly.

Yet every once in a while I am amply repaid for my trouble when a question makes me think. For instance, a woman wrote recently, asking me to explain the difference between a star and a planet. I grinned and was about to write: "A star is a large body at whose core there are nuclear reactions so that it glows with heat and light. A planet circles a star and is too small to develop nuclear reactions, so that it is dark and shines only by reflected light from the star."

Then, a little to my surprise, I started thinking. Can the matter of stars and planets be dismissed so easily? So I decided to write an essay on the subject.

If you consider a particular class of substances that come in different sizes, it often appears that the smaller the size, the more numerous the indi-

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vidual objects. Thus, stones are more numerous than boulders, pebbles than stones, sand-grains than pebbles. Again, zebras are more numerous than elephants, mice than zebras, flies than mice, bacteria than flies.

"The Rule of Numerous Small" (as I call it) seems to apply to astronomic objects as well. The first indication of this came in connection with the brightness of stars. The ancient Greek astronomer, Hipparchus, divided stars into six classes — first magnitude for the brightest, then second magnitude and so on, down to sixth magnitude for the faintest stars. The number of first magnitude stars was small, but there was a larger number of second magnitude stars, a still larger number of third magnitude stars and so on. Fully half of all the visible stars are of the sixth magnitude.

It seemed natural, in ancient and medieval times, to suppose that the visible stars were all there were. After all, if you don't see something, it's not there. With the invention of the telescope, however, it became apparent that there were stars too dim for the unaided eye to see. it was then possible to extend the line of magnitudes in the direction of dimness, to classify stars as of the seventh magnitude, the eighth, and so on. As it turned out, the number of stars at a particular magnitude continued to increase as one went down the line to dimmer and dimmer levels.

The ancients, of course, assumed that all the stars were at the same distance from us, since all, they thought, were attached to a solid celestial sphere. It seemed, therefore, that one star was dimmer than another only because it was the smaller of the two. (It was for this reason that the classes were called "magnitudes," a term that implies size rather than brightness.) For small stars to be more numerous than large stars did not seem at all strange.

Nowadays, however, we know that stars can be at widely different distances from us, and that a star can appear dim not only because it is small, but because it is distant.

It is possible, nevertheless, to determine the distances of various stars and to make allowance for that. We can then determine what the magnitudes would be if all were at the fixed distance of 10 parsecs (or 32.6 light-years). This gives us "absolute magnitudes." If we line up the stars in this fashion, we find that the larger the absolute magnitude and the lower the true brightness (or "luminosity") of a star, the smaller its mass and the more numerous the members of its class are. Thus, for every star that is more massive than the Sun, and therefore more luminous, there are twenty stars that are less massive and less luminous than the Sun.

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Luminosity increases and decreases with mass, but much more rapidly. Thus, Procyon is 1.8 times as massive as the Sun, but 5.8 times as luminous; Sirius is 2.5 times as massive as the Sun, but 23 times as luminous. On the other hand, 70 Ophiuchi A is 0.95 times the mass of the Sun, but only 0.36 times as luminous.

As mass continues to decrease, there must soon come a point where a star is too dim to be detected, and that means we are nearing a dividing line between stars and planets. What, then, is the least luminous (and, therefore, least massive) star known?

In my book, *Alpha Centauri, the Nearest Star,* published in 1976, I list the least luminous star as "Van Biesbroek's Star," so called because it had been discovered by a Belgian-American astronomer, George van Biesbroeck, about 1940. It can also be called by the more convenient name of "VB 10."

The most recent value I can find for the absolute magnitude of VB 10 is 18.6. This means that VB 10 is 13.9 magnitudes dimmer than the Sun. Magnitude is a logarithmic function and for each unit of magnitude, the luminosity must decrease by a factor of 2.512. It follows that VB 10 is only 1/350,000 as luminous as the Sun (i.e. 0.000003 S).

If our Sun were replaced by VB10, we would see, of course, a much smaller object in the sky, for VB 10 probably has a diameter of not more than 200,000 kilometers. This is about 1/7 the diameter of the Sun, so that VB 10 would appear to have an angular diameter of a little over 4 minutes. We would just make it out as a tiny disc rather than as a mere point of light.

It would be a deep red in color for, considering its size, it would not develop enough nuclear energy at the center to raise its surface to more than red-heat. VB 10's brightness would appear to be only 1.3 times that of the full Moon now, so that Earth would be bathed in nothing more than a ruddy moonlight. As for the Moon itself, under such circumstances it would shine by reflecting the red light of VB 10, with a total brightness, at the full, that would be equal to that of a star such as Arcturus. This brightness would be spread thinly over the entire face of the Moon. I doubt that the Moon could be seen at all, in such a case, without some sort of magnification.

Since my book was published, however, VB 10 has been dethroned. In 1981, a dimmer star was identified and, in 1983, a still dimmer one. The latter, which now holds the record, is LHS 2924, and it has an absolute magnitude of 20. That would make it only 2/7 as luminous as

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VB 10, or about 1/1,200,000 as luminous as our Sun (0.0000008 S). If it were put in the position of our Sun, it would have a brightness only 2/5 that of the full Moon under present conditions.

How massive are these very dim stars? The answer to that is very hard to determine with any degree of certainty, but the best estimate seems to make them 0.06 times as massive as the Sun (or 1/17 the mass of the Sun, if you prefer fractions).

Now let's approach the matter from the other end. What is the most massive body we know that is not massive enough to develop enough heat of any kind to glow of its own light?

The answer to that is simple. The largest non-glowing object we know is the planet Jupiter, which is visible only by the reflected light of the Sun.

Jupiter has a mass nearly 1/1000 that of the Sun, or 0.001 S. This means that LHS 2924 has a mass of about 60 times that of Jupiter (60 J). Somewhere in between 1 J and 60 J, then, is the dividing line between a star and a planet. It may not be a sharp dividing line, because factors other than mass (say, the chemical constitution of the object) may affect the ability of an object to generate light of its own.

Still, as a rule of thumb we might say that 10 J is the boundary line. Any object that has a mass less than 10 times that of Jupiter might be considered a planet, while any object with a mass more than 10 times that of Jupiter might be considered a star.

By the Rule of Numerous Small, we might take it for granted that there must be a far greater number of planets in the Universe than there are stars, since planets are small and stars are large.

Judging from our Solar system alone, this is certainly so. Our Solar system contains only one body that is large enough to be a star — the Sun. It also has countless numbers of dark objects orbiting the Sun, ranging in size from Jupiter down to microscopic dust particles.

The four largest bodies orbiting the Sun — the "gas giants," Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune — make up a little over 99 percent of the total mass orbiting the Sun. Everything else, including Earth and the other small planets, all the satellites, asteroids, meteoroids and comets, make up the other 1 percent. An objective observer, viewing the Solar system, would conclude that it consisted of the Sun, four planets, and a scattering of inconsiderable debris.

The smallest of the Sun's gas giants is Uranus, whch has a mass about

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1/22 that of Jupiter. We might say, then, rather arbitrarily, that all objects with masses above 10 J are stars; that objects with masses of from 10 J down to 0.05 J are planets; and that objects with masses of less than 0.05 J (including our Earth) are "subplanets."

By this definition, we can say that our Solar system consists of one star, four planets, and innumerable subplanets. If other stars are attended by similar planetary systems (and the general feeling among astronomers that it is likely that they are) then that alone should mean there are four times as many planets as there are stars.

This, however, perhaps unfairly restricts planets to dark bodies that orbit stars. Why should there not be planets that are totally independent of stars?

After all, stars are more numerous the smaller they are, in line with the Rule of Numerous Small, and why should we feel it right to limit ourselves only to those stars that can be sensed by our various instruments, any more than the ancients were right to limit themselves only to those stars that could be sensed by the unaided eye?

Whatever process is involved in star formation, that process seems to form middle sized stars more often than giant ones, and small ones more often than middle sized ones. Might that process not form very small ones — ones too small to develop nuclear reactions and to glow —more often still. Such very small "stars" would, in fact, be planets that did not orbit some nearby star but orbited the center of the Galaxy independently. This would be analogous to the asteroids of the Solar system which are small enough to be satellites but aren't; instead of orbiting some nearby planet, they orbit the Sun directly.

There is a tendency to call such independent planetary objects "black dwarfs," but I don't think that's a good name, since it is also used for white dwarf stars that have finally cooled off to the point where they no longer radiate detectably, and such black dwarfs can have masses far greater than those we associate with planetary bodies.

It seems to me that we ought to call planetary bodies that are independent members of the Galaxy "primary planets" and planetary bodies that orbit stars "secondary planets." (It may be that we ought to speak of primary and secondary subplanets, too.)

Although we have detected innumerable stars, we have not yet surely detected secondary planets outside the four in our own Solar system. There have been wobbles in the motion of some nearby stars that have been interpreted as suggesting the presence of secondary planets in

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orbit about them, but these suggestions are no longer generally accepted. More recently, belts of dust and gravel have been detected about some stars and these may suggest the presence of secondary planets, but we can't yet be certain of that.

As for primary planets, the situation seems much worse. After all, the only reason we can hope to detect secondary planets is precisely because there is a nearby star. The nearby star might wobble in its motion under the pull of a relatively large nearby planet, or the planet may be detected by its reflection of the light of that nearby star.

It's the essence of a primary planet (assuming that it exists) that there is no nearby star, no star to be made to wobble, no star to lend light for reflection.

Can we ever detect a primary planet, then, by direct observation?

Possibly!

Even if its gravitational field is too weak to be detectable and even if it neither gives off light of its own nor has available starlight to reflect, it may still be warm enough to give off infra-red radiation or some characteristic kind of microwave radiation, and we may yet develop methods for detecting that.

The ability to do so may be enhanced in one of two fashions. We may establish a space telescope large enough to outdo the abilities of ground-based telescopes by a considerable margin, or we may develop starships that can carry human beings on explorations far beyond the Solar system.

Finally, some primary planet may be moving about the Galactic center in an orbit that intersects that of the Sun. There may come a time when such a primary planet wanders in from interstellar space and moves through the outskirts of our planetary system. What excitement that would give rise to, except that the chances against such a thing happening would be — well, astronomical.

And yet there are other kinds of evidence altogether.

Judging from what we can see, the mass of a typical galaxy (like our own, for instance) might be 100 billion times that of our Sun, and this mass is strongly concentrated toward the center. Perhaps ninety percent of it is in the central core of the galaxy, which makes up a small percentage of the total volume, while the remaining 10 percent is spread through the voluminous outer regions.

This bears a certain similarity to the Solar system, where most of the

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mass is concentrated in the central Sun, and only a small portion is spread through the vast outer regions of the system.

If this is truly the structure of typical galaxies, then the rotation of the parts thereof should show similarities to the rotation of the parts of our Solar system. The farther a planet from the Sun, for instance, the more slowly it traverses its orbit, because the intensity of the gravitational pull of the sun falls off with distance. In accordance with this, astronomers were quite sure that the farther a galactic region would be from the galactic center, the slower the rotational movement of the stars in that region.

In recent years, astronomers have measured the rotational rates of galactic regions at increasing distances from the center, and they have found, to their astonishment, that this doesn't hold true. The rotation rate does not decline with distance in the manner it was expected to.

The conclusion, then, is that the mass of the galaxies is *not* as heavily concentrated toward the center as had been thought. Instead, the mass must be spread out much more evenly — and well beyond what seems to be the edge of the galaxy.

It may be, then, that each galaxy (including our own) in addition to the stars we can plainly see, must have a halo of substantial mass enveloping the entire body of the galaxy, a halo made up of something that we *can't* see. And each galaxy must then be substantially more massive than we thought it to be.

If this is so, then another problem might be solved. Galaxies exist in clusters of various sizes. If a typical cluster of galaxies is examined, the individual galaxies are all found to be in random motion within the cluster. These motions would tend to break up and disrupt the cluster, unless the overall gravitational field of the cluster is intense enough to hold the components together despite their motion. However, the mass of a cluster, judging from its content of visible stars, is insufficient to hold it together even though it is obviously *being* held together. And the larger the cluster, the more the gravitational field of its visible stars falls short.

The matter becomes less puzzling at once if you take into account the mass of the invisible halos, and if you assume also that there must be some mass distributed between the individual galaxies of a cluster.

Finally, the Universe as a whole has only about one percent of the mass required to keep it from expanding forever (that is, from being "open"), at least if one goes by the stars one can see in the Universe.

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Some astronomers feel that it would make more sense to have the Universe "closed"; that is, to have the expansion slowed to an eventual halt by the Universe's overall gravitational field, and for there to follow a slow, but accelerating contraction, ending in a Big Crunch. Again the halo of the galaxies might supply the additional mass required for that.

But if the puzzles of the rotating galaxies, the held-together clusters, and the apparently-open Universe, are all solved by the galactic halos, that simply supplies us with another puzzle. Of what does the halo consist? If there is mass there, that we can't see bacause it is not composed of stars, of what *is* it composed? (Astronomers call this the "mystery of the missing mass.")

One possibility, obviously, is that the mass of the halo consists of innumerable primary planets. Such objects would neither glow, nor find light to reflect, so they would be completely invisible to us. Their individual contributions to the gravitational fields of the galaxies, however, and to that of the Universe as a whole, would be significant.

Suppose that the average mass of a primary planet was that of Jupiter. If there were a thousand such primary planets in the halo for every visible star in the Galaxy proper, then that would suffice to double the apparent mass of the Galaxy.

If you add in the primary planets scattered through the body of each galaxy and theough the space between the galaxies, you might end with a hundred thousand primary planets for every visible star in the Universe. That would explain the manner in which clusters of galaxies hang together, and would also suffice to close the Universe, and to solve the mystery of the missing mass altogether.

To be sure, a hundred thousand primary planets for every visible star seems to be pitching it a bit strong even for the Rule of Numerous Small. But then, why blame all the missing mass on primary planets? There are other possibilities, too.

The galactic halos, and the space between the galaxies, might, for instance, be littered with black holes, which could each have a mass equal to that of a star, even to that of a giant star, and, indeed, even to that of a cluster of stars, Despite their potentially huge masses, a black hole in isolation in space would be as invisible as a primary planet.

It could be, then, that the halos are made up of substantial numbers of black holes with a correspondingly much smaller (and more believable) number of primary planets.

But, in that case, there is another puzzle. As galaxies formed, the pull

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of their own gravitational fields must have acted to concentrate their visible stars strongly toward the center. If so, why should it not have acted to concentrate primary planets and black holes strongly toward the center, also? Why should one type of mass have been concentrated and another kind not?

There is an even more serious objection. There are theoretical reasons for arguing that the number of protons and neutrons that can possibly exist in the Universe as it is, is just about large enough to make up the mass that we can see. If, then, the mass of the Universe is significantly greater than the mass we can see, that excess must be made up of something other than protons and neutrons.

Primary planets and, for that matter, black holes are made up almost entirely of protons and neutrons (as are the stars); and so, if the theoretical argument is correct, primary planets and black holes cannot be responsible for the missing mass. Astronomers are therefore looking for exotic explanations, such as neutrinos (see NOTHING AND ALL, F&SF, February 1981) or for even more outlandish particles.

Even that, of course, does not mean that primary planets do not exist at all — merely that they do not exist in great numbers. There can still be a relative few without overrunning the permissible numbers of protons and neutrons. Of course, the fewer there are, the more difficult it would be to detect them.

But we have to ask ourselves another question. Does the Rule of Numerous Small always work?

Obviously not. If we consider human males, or human females, there are more, in each case, of medium size than of large size. But there are also more of medium size than of small size. In these cases if one starts with very large individuals and considers the number of those who are smaller and still smaller, at first the numbers increase — but then they peak and begin to decrease again.

Is it possible that the size of stars also peaks at some value and that below that value the number of stars falls off precipitously?

Stars are formed through the condensation of huge clouds of gas and dust. In general, the more massive a cloud is, the more massive the star it will form, or the greater the number of stars it will form, or both.

Presumably, then, stars of very small mass are formed from relatively small clouds. But the smaller the cloud, the weaker its overall gravitational field and the less likely it is to undergo condensation under the

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inward pull of that field.

Some astronomers argue that a cloud that is so small that it can only form a primary planet on condensation, would be too small to condense at all. To be sure, secondary planets such as Jupiter, and secondary subplanets such as Earth, have obviously formed, but only in the turbulent outskirts of a cloud large enough to form the Sun on condensation.

From this point of view, it may be that primary planets are not at all likely. In that case, we may have to be satisfied with the simple distinction between stars and planets that I began with. Stars are massive and give off light. Planets are small, do not give off light, and orbit stars.

That leaves us one final matter to take up before I am done.

In normal stars, like our Sun, the energy that keeps them shining originates from nuclear fusion at their core, fusion that converts hydrogen-1 to helium-4.

For this to take place, however, a certain critical temperature must be reached at the core of the star as it condenses from the initial cloud. It has been calculated that if a condensing star is less than 0.085 times the mass of the Sun (or about 1/12 its mass), then that critical temperature won't be reached.

Yet a star that is somewhat less than 1/12 the mass of our Sun, once formed, may attain a central temperature that is high enough to fuse hydrogen-2 (deuterium) to helium-3. (Deuterium, of all stable atoms, is the easiest to fuse.)

Deuterium, however, is much less common than hydrogen-1 and is quickly consumed past the point where it will serve as a fuel. Instead of shining for many billions of years as a small hydrogen-fusing star will, a deuterium-fusing star will only shine for a few million years.

An even smaller star may not reach a temperature that will bring about any fusion at all; yet the kinetic energy of its contraction may bring about a high enough temperature to make it glow — though for an even shorter period than is true of the deuterium-fusers.

Such small stars, which produce light by means short of true hydrogen fusion, might not be considered by some to be true stars. Perhaps we might call them "substars."

But substars can be seen, if they exist, and are sufficiently close to us. Indeed, stars like VB 10 and LHS 2924 (and any other stars equally dim) seem to have masses somewhat less than 1/12 that of our Sun. In that case, they may well be substars. *(See page 142.)*

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Here is a self-contained tale from Gene Wolfe's upcoming novel, about an unhappy wife and her search for wealth.

The Woman Who Went Out

BY
GENE WOLFE

Phye's tale had not yet begun when a shout of laughter woke me. No doubt she had missed the circle purposely, or perhaps one of the men had pinched her as she threw, or jostled her arm. I give here as much of it as I recall.

Once there was a woman whose husband was very rich but would never give her any money. They had an estate outside the city and a fine house in it, with many slaves and so on, but her gowns were still the gowns she had brought from her father's house, and her husband would not buy her so much as a comb.

One day when she lay weeping on her bed, her maid discovered her there. Now her maid was a Babylonian and as clever as all the people of that city are, and so she said, "My lady, I can guess easily enough why you weep. It's because all the other ladies hereabout have lovers to entertain them, and buy them silver bracelets and curios from Riverland, and talking birds that tell them how beautiful they are even when their lovers aren't around to do it. While you, poor thing, have only that ugly old fool, your husband, a skinflint who never gives you so much as a sparrow."

"No," said her mistress, "it's because he never gives me any money."

"That's what I said," said her maid. "For we women, men and money are the same thing, after all. Have I ever told you how we girls get our dowries in Babylon?"

"No," said her mistress again. "But please do, even if it isn't a very good story. Because hearing even a poor story would be better than lying on this barren bed crying away my life."

"Why, it's no story at all," said

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her maid, "but the plain truth. When a girl in my city approaches the age of marriage, she sells herself to whatever men she likes for as much as they'll pay. In that way the best-looking soon accumulate a great deal of money and so get a handsome husband, and soon after, many comely children. By the same token, homely girls get none and thus it is that we Babylonians are the best-looking people in the whole world." (Here Phye, whom I was watching by this time through the doorway, patted her hair to considerable laughter and applause.) "Though you, my lady, would be thought lovely anywhere, I must say."

"That's extremely interesting," said her mistress, "and I certainly never knew it. But it doesn't do me the least good; I'm married already, so I don't need another dowry."

"True," said her maid. "But suppose you were to go out at night and make whatever handsome men you meet the same sort of offer our Babylonian girls do? You'd have a handsome lover for the night, and very quickly a great deal of money."

"It's certainly a most attractive idea," her mistress admitted, "but it seems to me that it's out of the question. My husband sleeps with me every night. If he were to wake and find me gone. . . . Now that you mention it, I suppose it *might* be possible to administer some sort of mild and harmless medication that would assure him of a good night's sleep. Do you happen to know of a dealer in such preparations?"

Her maid shook her head sadly. "Most of them are ineffective, my lady, and even the worst cost a great deal. But I know a trick worth a dozen of them, if you can tell me where to find the last resting place of an amorous woman."

"Really?" said her mistress. "Magic? How fascinating! You know, my cousin Phyllis's grave is only a short walk from here. Would that do, do you think?"

"I don't know," said the maid. "Was she fond of men?"

"Extremely," said her mistress. "And when she died, one of my uncle's he-goats wouldn't eat for a month."

"Then she'd be perfect," said the maid. "Here's all we have to do. At dinner tonight, you must slip something into your husband's food that will make him ill—"

"Night soil, you mean?" her mistress suggested.

The maid shook her head. "Too obvious . . . I have it! He's accustomed to rancid oil — it's the only sort he'll let us buy for the kitchen. Give me that old pan to take to the market, and I'll trade it for the freshest, purest oil I can find. That should make him sick, and he'll sleep overnight in the temple of the Healing God in the hope of a cure. When he's gone, you and I will dig some earth from the garden and take it to your

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cousin's grave. There you'll moisten it with a certain fluid I'll indicate to you — you have a plentiful supply — and we'll make a doll of clay, kneading a lock of your hair into it."

Her mistress clapped her hands with delight. "Why this is *much* better than crying!"

"Then," her maid continued, "we'll lay the doll on her grave and engage in a recitation in which I shall prompt you. After that, whenever you want to leave at night, all you'll have to do is put the clay doll in your bed in your place. If your husband wakes, he'll see you beside him. And if he embraces the doll, he'll meet with such a reception as will endear you to him forever."

"Wonderful!" exclaimed her mistress, and that very night they carried out their plan with complete success.

The next night the lady waited until her husband was asleep, put the doll in their bed beside him, and enjoyed a succession of fascinating adventures in the city that left her a great deal wealthier than she had been before.

All went well for some time, she adventuring almost every night and her husband never complaining, though she noticed the clay doll was losing its proper shape. Early each morning when she returned, she would pat it until it looked as it had when she and the maid had formed it. But every night when she took it out again, she found that the clay had shifted downward in a most alarming fashion; and at last she told her maid the problem.

"Alas, my lady," said the maid. "I feared this might occur. In Babylon we fire these figures in a potter's furnace — then there's no further trouble. But since you had no money and I didn't know of a potter here who'd be likely to cooperate without it, I neglected that step."

"What are you talking about?" said her mistress. "What's the matter with the doll?"

Her maid sighed. "It's a condition in which you would not, I think, wish to find yourself, my lady. If nature is allowed to take its course, there will soon be *two* clay dolls instead of one."

"How horrible!" said her mistress. "What can we do? Can't we bribe a potter to fire it now?"

"My lady," said her maid, "it would only crack later. I believe the best thing would be for us to bury the doll again in the place where we dug it up. You'll have to sleep with your husband — at least for a time — but that can't be helped. Do you by any chance remember the spot?"

"Why yes," said her mistress. "It was under the apple tree."

"Then that would be the best place to put it," said the maid.

And so they did, and the woman began sleeping with her husband once more.

One day one of his rivals in busi-

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ness, a man as penurious as himself, found him moping about the market. "What's the matter?" he said. "Has someone cheated you?" For he would have been sorry indeed to hear that the husband had been cheated by anyone other then himself.

"No," said the husband. "It's my wife."

"Ah," said his rival. "There's a great deal of that going around these days, you know."

"Not long ago," said the husband, "she was as passionate as any man could wish. But now . . ."

"I can well imagine," said his rival. "Not that I've ever experienced the same thing myself."

"It's like embracing a woman of clay," said the poor husband. "And all I can think of is how I used to go to dinner parties and have a fine woman every night. I thought that when I married it would be better — because I used to have to give a party myself now and then, and it was so costly — but honestly I think the old days were better, and in fact I know it."

"Then all you have to do is return to them," said his rival. "Send her back to her father."

"And refund her dowry?" asked the husband. "You must be mad!"

"Then I can teach you a spell that will serve your turn," said his rival, who had no faith in such spells himself. "At least, my grandfather swore by it. You must find a blossoming tree in green and ardent health."

"Why the apple tree in our garden has been blooming for days," said the husband. "I declare, you've never seen a tree doing better."

"Exactly the thing, then," said his rival. "You must lop off a limb and hide it under your bed. Whenever you want to go out and amuse yourself, take out the limb and put it in the bed in your place, saying:

Stick I cut, so brave and bright,
Stick be straight and strong tonight!

Believe me, as long as your wife doesn't light the lamp, she'll never know the difference." Then the rival went away, chuckling as he wondered whether his grandfather's spell would work.

But the husband ran home, and noting that the apple tree in his garden was still in flower, he immediately ordered his gardener to saw off its largest limb.

"It'll be the death of it," said the gardener, shaking his head.

"I don't care," said the husband. "It quite spoils the symmetry all natural objects should possess; so cut it off."

And thus it was done, and the husband carried the limb to the bedroom he shared with his wife and put it beneath the bed.

That night the woman noticed that her husband's hair smelled of apple blossoms, which it certainly nev-

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er had before. "Why, he's trying to make himself attractive for me," she said to herself. "And who knows what may come of that. . . . I should encourage him."

She gave him a kiss on the cheek, one thing led to another, and she was embraced ardently all night, until at last she fell into an exhausted sleep.

At dawn her husband returned, put the limb under the bed once more, and lay down congratulating himself.

This went on for several nights, until at last in the very heat of love, the woman said, "Although you're stout and strong all night, dear, I notice you're always exhausted in the morning. You'd better get some rest when we're finished."

To this, the limb replied, "I wilt not, Stepmother." Which so surprised the woman that she lit the lamp.

You may imagine her delight then, for she saw in her bed not the withered old husband she had expected, but a blooming youth with fair, red cheeks. She blew out the lamp at once, and for some time they came together each night as happily as any pair could.

It was not to continue. One night she rolled over meaning to embrace her lover and found, to her great disgust, that she was caressing her husband instead. Thereafter the same thing occurred more and more frequently, for her husband had discovered that he was no longer so young as once he had been, and he was sorely pained by the inroads his nighttime adventures were making in his fortune.

But when her husband had occupied the bed every night for nearly a month, the woman smelled apple blossoms again. Then, kissing her lover, she exclaimed, "If only he were dead! I'd have his money, and we could live together for the rest of our lives. You wouldn't be niggardly to me, would you, darling?"

"Never, Stepmother," said her lover. "Every spring I would furnish our house anew, and each fall I would shower upon you the fruits of the earth."

That sounded promising, and by this time the woman had convinced herself that "Stepmother" was only her lover's pet name for her, he being at least in appearance somewhat the younger. Thus, she said, "Do it, then! Do it tonight!"

"I will, Stepmother."

And the next morning the man and his wife were found dead by the gardener, hanged with the same rope. A noose had been tied in each end, and the rope thrown over the largest limb of the apple tree in the garden.

The gardener and the lady's maid were accused of murdering them, and were tried on the Areopagus; but the deaths were ruled a double suicide, and husband and wife were buried beneath the apple tree.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 37

In the January issue, we asked for apt and humorous subtitles for any SF work and received an excellent response. One contributor, Chuck Holst, said that the comp was too easy and suggested the additional requirement that the subtitle also be an SF title, e.g.: *You Will Never Be the Same (Fun With Your New Head)*. Well, perhaps for some future contest. Meanwhile, the winners:

FIRST PRIZE

The Hobbit (Drug abuse in the English upper class)

Foundation's Edge (A realtor's guide to termite inspection)

Something Wicked This Way Comes (Sexual practices of the Austrian nazis)

At the Mountains of Madness (Becky Schwiggel of Walla Walla, Washington talks about her breast reduction surgery)

The Stainless Steel Rat (Man vs. electronic surveillance in the DeLorean case)

The Amber Chronicles (My child was a bedwetter)

Ringworld (I was a public bath-house maintenance worker)

—*Dan F. Gates*
Wichita, KS

SECOND PRIZE

The Long Watch (The art of Salvador Dali)

The Nitrogen Fix (Weird addictions among extraterrestrials)

Juxtaposition (Investigations by Masters and Johnson)

On A Pale Horse (Further investigations by Masters and Johnson)

The Ringworld Engineers (The inside story at Bell telephone)

Harpist in the Wind (Memoirs of the world's snootiest marching band)

—*Charles R. Lembke*
Monterey Park, CA

RUNNERS UP

Odd John (How to futurize your bathroom)

Little, Big (Hints on developing your bustline)

The Food of the Gods (The Erich von Daniken cookbook)

Shape Changer (Jane Fonda's new workout book)

"Gonna Roll the Bones" (A history of chiropractic medicine)

Three Hearts and Three Lions (Speculations on the Baby Fae controversy)

—*Jean MacKay Jackson*
Broken Arrow, OK

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep (A government funded study: Golden Fleece Award, all time winner)

Firestarter (The management series: surviving a lean year)

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The Black Hole (National debt management)

Around the World in 80 Days (automation in the U.S. Postal Service)

—*Horace Shaeff*
Norristown, PA

Destination: Void (A review of the U.S. Postal Service)

The Hounds of Thandolos (Things Barbara Woodhouse never told you)

I Robot (Canoeing around Boston)

The Mindkiller (A review of daytime TV)

—*M. C. McSherry*
Seattle, WA

The Robots of Dawn, (A purchaser's guide to home coffee makers)

The Sheep Look Up (The in depth study of a fetish)

Danse Macabre (Twelve home disco lessons)

Rogue Moon (the story of a psychopathic streaker)

—*Dean Wesley Smith*
Lincoln City, OR

Ringworld (Handbook of planetary fungal diseases)

Sirius (But not critical)

Psion (Psion, harvest moon)

The Snow Queen (Christine DeLorean's shocking story)

Utopia 3 (Dystopia 2 [in overtime]. Utopia advances to the finals.)

—*George Alec Effinger*
New Orleans, LA

COMPETITION 38 (suggested by John Brunner)

Take the opening sentences of not fewer than three, not more than seven, SF novels or stories, and arrange them to make the opening paragraph(s) of another, nonexistent story — the more ridiculous the better. Give sources; invent a title for the result.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by June 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 38 will appear in the Oct. Issue.

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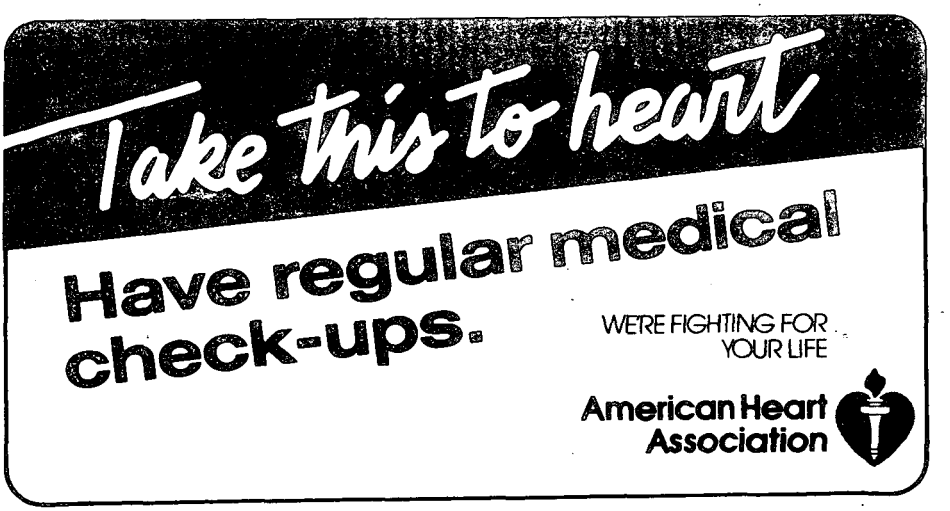

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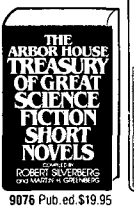

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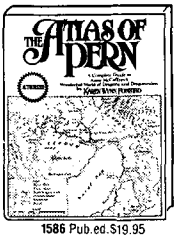

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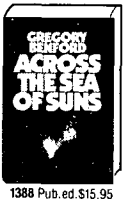

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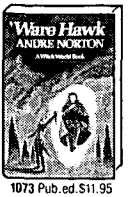

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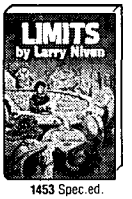

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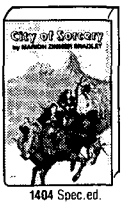

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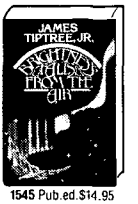

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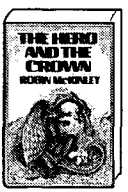

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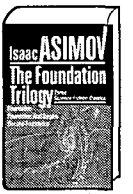

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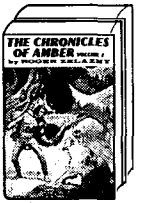

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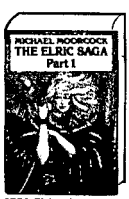

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